

100 HOTTEST NEW GAMES
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METRO EXODUS
ANTHEM
GHOST OF TSUSHIMA
SPIDER-MAN
THE LAST OF US: PART II
STARFIELD
HITMAN 2
DEVIL MAY CRY 5
ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY
BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2
DRAGON QUEST XI
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XBOX TWO?
MICROSOFT KICKSTARTS THE GENERATION RACE
FALLOUT 76
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CYBERPUNK 2077
FEAR THE WOLVES
SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE
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SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER
RESIDENT EVIL 2
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THE DIVISION 2
SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE
OVERCOOKED 2
JUST CAUSE 4
TRIALS RISING
DOOM ETERNAL
FUTURE
ISSUE 202

The hype has you. You don't exactly know how you ended up in it, but it surrounds you on all sides. It calls out to you. It's intoxicating. How do you proceed?

Hype has become a little bit of a dirty word in some gaming circles, but I've always thought that hype was a rather important part of the life cycle of the industry, and E3 is its lynchpin. And while we can get caught up in finding winners and losers, who had a good show and who didn't, who dropped the ball and who dropped a bombshell, I care more about the overall feeling I walk away from E3 with.

And this year, the overall feeling was being pumped for the next two years of games. I don't think I've come out of an E3 in recent memory so energised and excited about what's on the horizon. And a lot of that is because all of the biggest publishers came to the event swinging hard. They didn't always hit their targets, and not everything I had hoped to see this year landed (*Metroid Prime 4*, Splinter Cell, something new from Rocksteady), but there was so much to digest.

In fact, as we compiled our fourth 100 Hottest New Games, this was probably the toughest to squeeze in everything that we wanted to highlight and every game we got to get a closer look at. So many games, big and small, caught our eye or offered something really refreshing and innovative.

And that's what I want from an E3. I want to feel enthused and excited for the future. I want to see my personal list of games to watch double in three days. I was beginning to think that would never happen again, but this year felt really special.

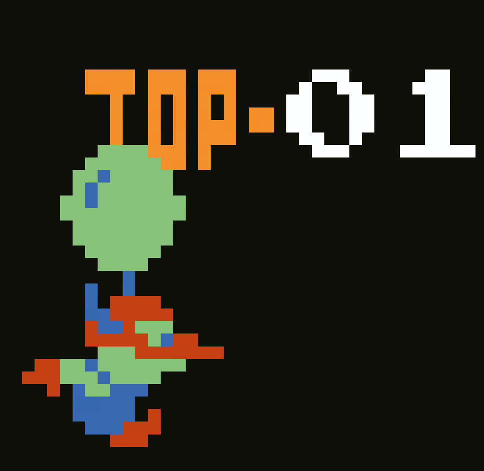
Jon Gordon

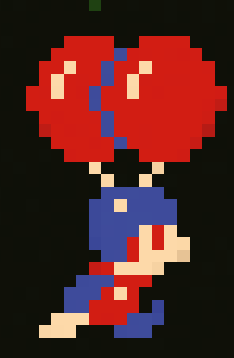
Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

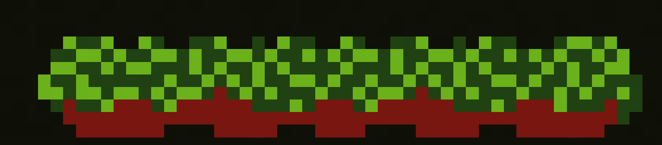


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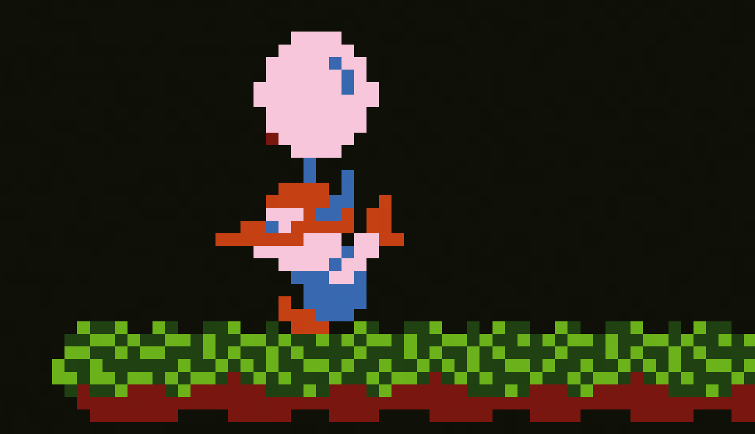
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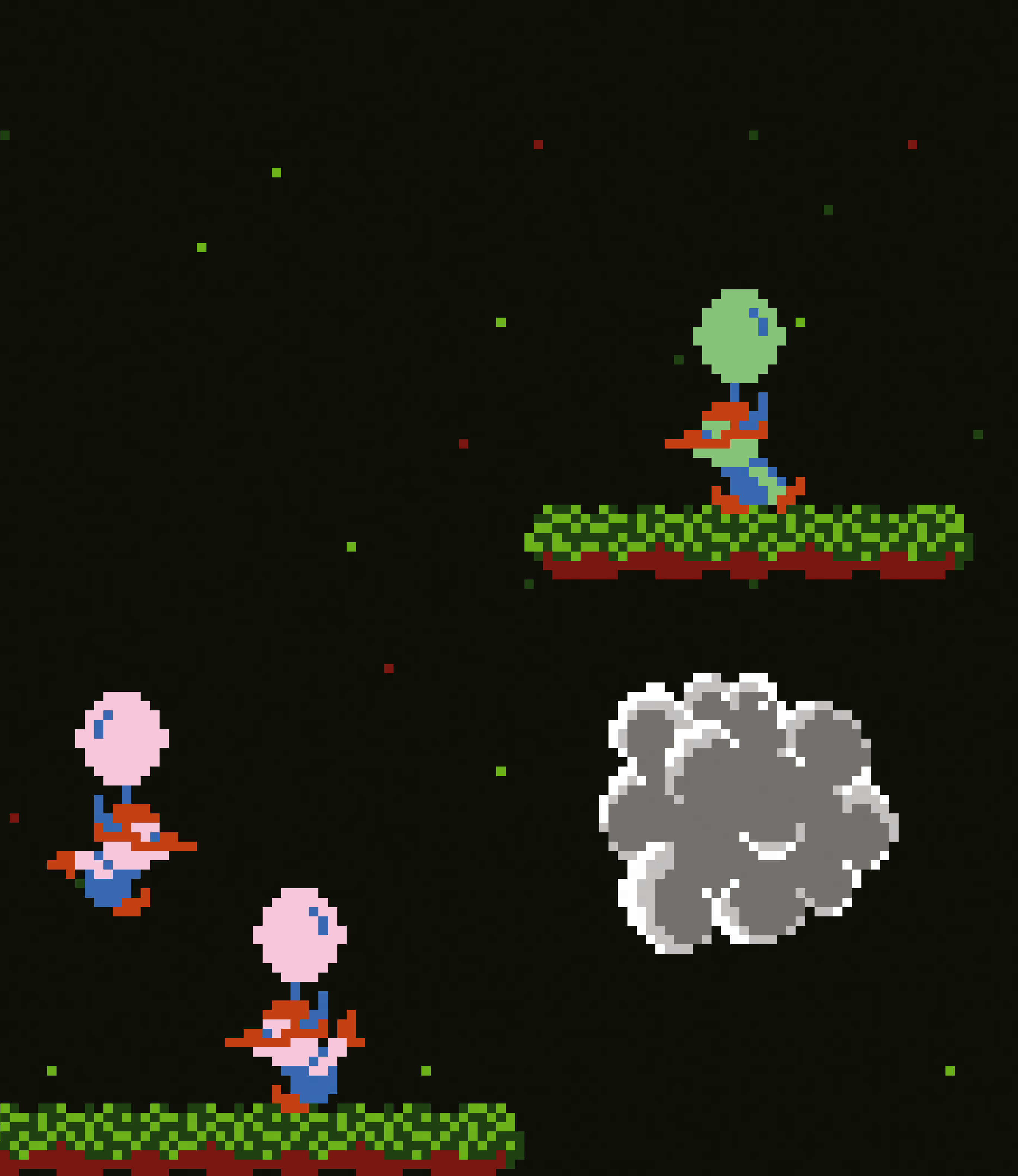








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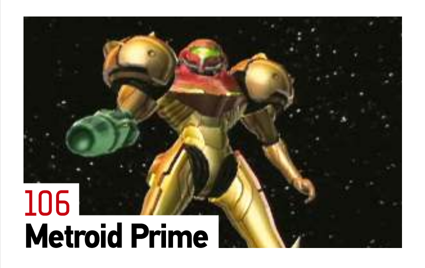

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SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT · NAUGHTY DOG · TBC 2019

THE LAST OF US: PART II

A FRESH LOOK AT ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS GAMES OF ALL TIME

01

IT'S TIME FOR THE INDUSTRY TO BEGIN CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS. It's a message that sits at the heart of Naughty Dog's ambitions as a studio and the intent behind the ongoing development of *The Last Of Us: Part II*. It's that thought – the idea of constantly contesting expectation and execution – that is trickling down through the studio's refinement and expansion of each and every one of the game's systems and mechanics; a process that is helping to elevate every aspect of this sequel, from its artificial intelligence to its environment design, lighting and animation, its spectacular underlying technology to the construction of its harrowing narrative. If Naughty Dog is able to pull this off, *The Last Of Us: Part II* will mark a turning point for the industry – a glimpse into what the future of will hold for interactive entertainment. Of that we are quite certain.

That may appear to be high praise, but Naughty Dog is entirely deserving of it. Set five years after the spellbinding conclusion to *The Last Of Us*, this long-awaited sequel picks up in a world still shrouded in conflict and contention. Ellie is older now, clearly scarred by the hardship that she has been forced to endure just to survive – the ramifications of Joel's climactic decision a weight on her weary shoulders, the world around her wrought with ruin because of it. Speaking of Joel, he is still nowhere to be seen in the early marketing push but clearly present, a commanding presence in Tommy's settlement back in Jackson county though he is no friend to his estranged surrogate daughter now. It's as they say: it is the old wounds that cut deepest into your soul.

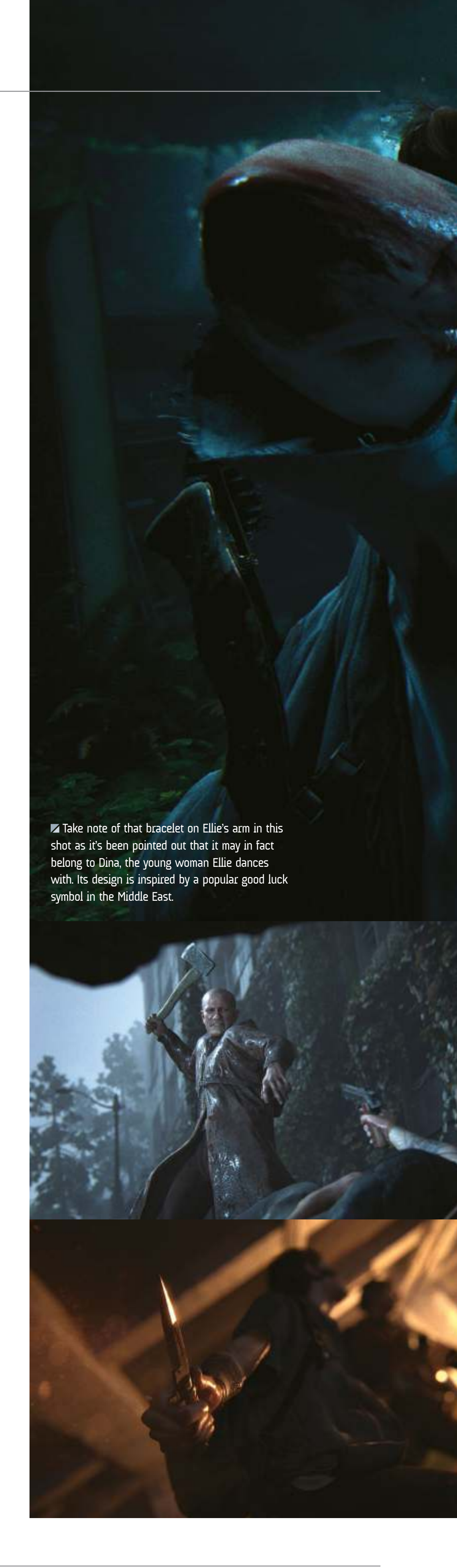
The infected are still an ever-present threat for those foolish enough to wander the naturalistic wastelands of the world alone, although they have become a part of life now – a part of routine existence, as normalised as eating, sleeping and breathing. Much like in the original adventure, it's the threat of humanity itself – of those that have been broken by the deranged routine or have succumbed to the whims of violent tribalism – that present the biggest threat to existence. That logic can be applied to the hostile groups found outside of Tommy's settlement – hanging and disembowelling any survivors that they may come across whilst out traipsing through the wilderness – but it can also be applied to our starring protagonist as well. A lot has changed in five years, and we're afraid of what Ellie might have become in her late-teenage years.

It is, however, something we will be forced to confront, process and come to terms with as we help usher Ellie through the tension-laced adventure. Ellie will be taking the lead in *The Last Of Us: Part II*, with creative director Neil Druckmann confirming that, while Joel will indeed play a critical role in the story, he will not return as a playable character. But before you turn your nose up at this creative decision, consider what we said at the beginning: this game is all about challenging assumptions. Given the crippling weight of expectation that has been placed upon Naughty Dog here, it was only inevitable that big changes were on the horizon.

Thankfully, each of them seems to have been made with conviction. When it comes to core elements of play, such as the returning emphasis on stealth movement and crippling melee combat, Naughty Dog has constructed something that looks positively unreal. The studio actually likens the evolution in its systems and mechanics between the two games as similar to when teams moved from 2D to 3D spaces back in the Nineties, such is the scope of what the team is trying to achieve here and the boundless enthusiasm for driving change that accompanies it.

Stealth, for example, was fairly binary in *The Last Of Us*. You move in and out of cover to remain in or drop out of stealth – the requirement to remain unseen or become thrust into perilous combat scenarios was easy to gauge and understand. The PlayStation 3 hardware allowed Naughty Dog to create something undoubtedly impressive, but it always wanted to do more; the PlayStation 4 (the extra thrust of power offered by the Pro, in particular) is effectively revealing a studio unshackled by technological restraint. The analogue stealth systems introduced in *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* are present here then but greatly expanded, and the results are astounding.

Ellie can now cross the huge environmental areas – discrete sandboxes that aren't all that dissimilar to those found in *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* – in a variety



Take note of that bracelet on Ellie's arm in this shot as it's been pointed out that it may in fact belong to Dina, the young woman Ellie dances with. Its design is inspired by a popular good luck symbol in the Middle East.



While the story of *The Last Of Us: Part II* remains rather mysterious, it's becoming clearer that Ellie's primary antagonists could well be a religious cult rather than the Clickers.



The Last Of Us: Part II appears to be drawing a lot of its world design and interactivity from Naughty Dog's experience with *Uncharted 4*. Stealth in foliage in particular stands out.

of movement stances, each affecting her visibility and versatility in a number of ways. She can stand to move quickly or drop to a crouch to become immersed in tall grass, the foliage helping to mask (but not completely cover) her approach towards points of interest and enemies; she can go prone too, allowing Ellie to duck beneath vehicles or lie completely out of sight. It's all about giving the player more choice and agency in any given situation.

This is particularly important here as Naughty Dog has introduced truly impressive AI systems to the equation. Groups of enemies will communicate fluidly to respond to your movement and actions, working independently to track you down and communicating dynamically through whistles. Should an adversary be forced to call out in a blind panic as you charge at them with a bloodied machete, they will call for direct assistance by name – willing specific NPC characters to enter the deadly fray. The call and response is certainly impressive, as too is the dynamism of enemy movements and tactics.

The combat areas are larger and full of more opportunity than before, and you'll find enemies working tactically and methodically through them in an attempt to locate Ellie once the peace has been disturbed. It makes every situation fraught with danger and panic; engaging with an enemy won't immediately call the pack down should you regain some semblance of stealth soon after, with combat becoming a push and pull between offense and defensive manoeuvrability.

You see, Ellie is strong – and we get the sense that characters out in the world might be more afraid of the legendary 'Wolf' than she is of them – but she's no Joel. The team is clear to emphasise this. The young survivor is hardened and resourceful, but she can't take quite a beating like the old Texan could. To compensate, Ellie can quickly crawl and dash through tight spaces other characters (and enemies) wouldn't be able to; a jump button has been introduced to let Ellie quickly cross chasms at your behst, while she is now able to pick up and launch items, like a glass bottle, for instance, at enemies while moving at a sprint. This is all about increasing your utility, reflecting how the character has been forced to grow and adapt in the five years since our last adventure to be as resourceful as possible.

> "THE AI IS EVEN SMARTER THAN IT WAS IN THE FIRST GAME. YOU'LL SEE ENEMIES CONSTANTLY CO-ORDINATING AND RELAYING KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN ONE ANOTHER. WE ARE TRYING TO REPRESENT THEM AS REAL, INTELLIGENT HUMANS"
> ANTHONY NEWMAN, CO-GAME DIRECTOR, NAUGHTY DOG

Should they catch you, however, you'll see enemies respond in kind. The variety of actions and responses has been greatly expanded; an enemy might launch you through a window or use parts of the environment to throw off your concentration. These systemic engagements bring a whole new level of fidelity and immersion into the flow of play, particularly when it combines with the, frankly, stunning level of detail presented in Ellie's defensive capabilities. In fact, consider this one small detail to get a sense of what Naughty Dog is working with here: the simple act of a well-timed dodge, be it away from an encroaching enemy or out of the path of an arrow flying towards you, the dodge system will examine the incoming direction of a melee or ranged strike and respond in real-time with a specific animation for Ellie rather than a generic sidestep. It's intricate and delicate, but then so is just about everything else in *The Last Of Us: Part II*.

Except for the melee combat. Look past the gorgeous animations and visual fidelity and you'll see some visceral and truly brutal combat. It's disgusting at times, reflecting the vulnerability of the characters that have been forced to survive in this world – they have come to believe that their only hope of seeing a new dawn is to bury blades into throats and pepper torsos with projectiles. You see it in the reactions too, you hear it in the screams of pain; if Ellie gets caught in the shoulder by an arrow you'll lose the ability to focus, the strength of her arm will weaken lowering accuracy, forcing you to retreat to safety to wrestle it out of your flesh. It's horrible, it's amazing, and it's only something that Naughty Dog is capable of delivering in real-time so seamlessly.

The Last Of Us: Part II is going to challenge your assumption of what is possible in a videogame. It's a dark and twisted drama that will directly confront the cruelty and human drama that sits at the heart of the game experience. Naughty Dog wants every decision that you make – every life that you take – to be a gruelling act, hard to watch. It wants you to feel the pain of the world coursing through your body, it wants *The Last Of Us: Part II* to show that there is more to gaming than entertainment factor alone. From everything we've seen the studio is on track to achieve its lofty goals, we just don't know whether our heart will be able to endure it.

Naughty Dog is really pulling no punches with the level of violence on show in this sequel and with good reason. It wants you to feel uncomfortable with how brutal Ellie can be.

It's not clear when in the game this scene between Ellie and Dina takes place, but it's a very touching and genuine moment. A big leap forward for performance capture.

As remorseless as Joel could be sometimes in the first game, Ellie appears to be just as ruthless in the fight to survive.

SUPER MARIO PARTY

02 This is looking like some classic multiplayer mini-game action with returning favourites and new spins on classics, but we're most intrigued by the promise of two undocked Switch consoles being lined up next to each other to create one big playing area across both devices. It's been shown off with a tank battle and we're interested to see what more it could do.



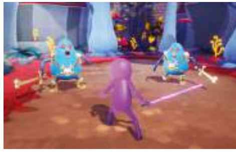
TOTEM TELLER

03 This gorgeous indie appeared during Microsoft's ID@ Xbox roundup, always a good source of enticing new games, and it really stood out. It promises a solo adventure of story archaeology as you explore a broken world and attempt to piece together the tales you find there. The paint meets digital style adds to the mysterious atmosphere really nicely.



TROVER SAVES THE UNIVERSE

04 This PS4 and PSVR action game is a new release from *Rick & Morty* co-creator Justin Roiland's game studio Squanch Games (Roiland is also the voice behind those characters and this new hero). Delving deep into the strangest parts of his imagination and free-wheeling associations of ideas, *Trover* is bizarre, colourful and happy to break every possible convention.



OVERKILL'S THE WALKING DEAD

05 Built by the team behind *Payday 2* and with the blessing of series creator Robert Kirkman, Overkill's venture into *The Walking Dead* offers exactly the kind of mix of co-op FPS combat and survival as you would expect. Mission-based and open in its approach, your preset classes need to combine to salvage the right resources and avoid traps of other humans. A very promising FPS.





"THE TEAM ALSO HEARD FEEDBACK LOUD AND CLEAR ON THE AMOUNT OF TIME SPENT PLAYING AS THE MASTER CHIEF IN HALO 5. IN HALO INFINITE, THE GAME WILL FOCUS ON THE MASTER CHIEF AND CONTINUE HIS SAGA AFTER THE EVENTS OF HALO 5"

CHRIS LEE, 343, STUDIO HEAD FPS



MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS · 343 INDUSTRIES · TBC 2019

HALO INFINITE

MASTER CHIEF HEADS BACK TO HIS ROOTS

06

THIS BRINGS BACK A LOT OF MEMORIES. Picking through a teaser trailer for a new Halo game, inferring what new features it may be suggesting will appear, speculating on what the story may entail, it all feels very 2006. And thankfully that's exactly what 343 Industries was aiming for. We say thankfully, because if it hadn't been aiming for a nostalgic feel to its *Halo Infinite* reveal then something would have been very wrong. This isn't the series going backwards or 343 hoping to bask in reflected glory. *Halo Infinite* is definitively reaching back to remember why so many millions of people queued up overnight to Finish The Fight over a decade ago.

How this was all delivered was through an in-engine demo reel of sorts for 343's new Slipspace Engine. We noted it didn't say real-time or 'running on Xbox One X', so in terms of the closeness to final quality in the visuals (which were stunning) we should take it with a pinch of salt. But then, this series has played in the CGI trailer waters before and to massive effect, so achieving something similar within Slipspace should at least be appreciated. If this is what Slipspace is capable of, the potential is here for not only the best looking Halo game ever made, but maybe a real contender for best-looking of the generation.

But which generation? Microsoft hasn't given a release date for *Halo Infinite*, and a lot of corporate talk about launching on the 'Xbox Family' makes us wonder if this could be the first example of a cross-generational Xbox release. Phil Spencer and Co have been talking a lot recently about their commitment to backwards compatibility now and going forward, so a Halo game that can be played on both current hardware and the next generation seems like an enticing way to prove the point.

But that's still some way off. What's much closer is the detail 343 has chosen to give us in this teaser, and to our eyes it's all very exciting. A lot of attention has been paid to Master Chief's armour design in the game, given a revamp by art director Nicolas Bouvier and calling back directly to its look in *Halo 3* (embellished by the return of Marty O'Donnell's score from that game). But this is not going to be a prequel according to 343 Industries. It will be a direct follow-up to *Halo 5: Guardians*, focusing its attention far more firmly on John-117 as fans have been calling for.

For us though, the exciting element of the teaser is what it suggests about the environment. For a start, the possibility that a Halo ring will play a major role in this story seems like a brilliant move to us. It's one of the series' most iconic and unique concepts and it has been horribly underused. Whether that then extends to an open-world structure, running around the ring to take on missions, is purely speculation on our part, and perhaps a step further than feels right for Halo. But big open spaces seem likely as the team is said to be trying to bring Bouvier's new art style to life, and his background in vast vistas is well documented. So, bigger levels with more options sounds great to us. And then there's the wildlife, also underused in Halo, but perhaps more importantly in this demo, signalling the number of AI creatures the engine can render and compute at any given time. The potential for large-scale battles seems high. So far we've seen very little, but there's still enough about *Halo Infinite* coming out from 343 to feel very optimistic about the future.

WARNER BROS. • IO INTERACTIVE • 13 NOV 2018

HITMAN 2

THINK DEADLY; MOVE QUICKLY



07

RESILIENCE. That's the word that first springs to mind when we think about the qualities one must posses to truly embody the role of Agent 47. In theory he's the world's greatest assassin, moving from one idyllic location to the next with a trail of carefully concealed bodies behind him – although with us planted behind the controller the best-laid plans can so often become a haphazard nightmare of murderous intentions and fumbled execution. Listen, it takes real resilience to get the perfect hit back on track after you're found swapping clothes with an unconscious guard in a storage room.

Resilience is also the word that we'd use to describe developer IO Interactive. The studio has demonstrated an incredible capacity for recovering from great hardship; IO has revealed *Hitman 2* unto the world, and just a year after diverging from Square Enix to go independent. It's that act of defiance that has ultimately led us to this moment, to receiving a sequel to 2016's *Hitman*.

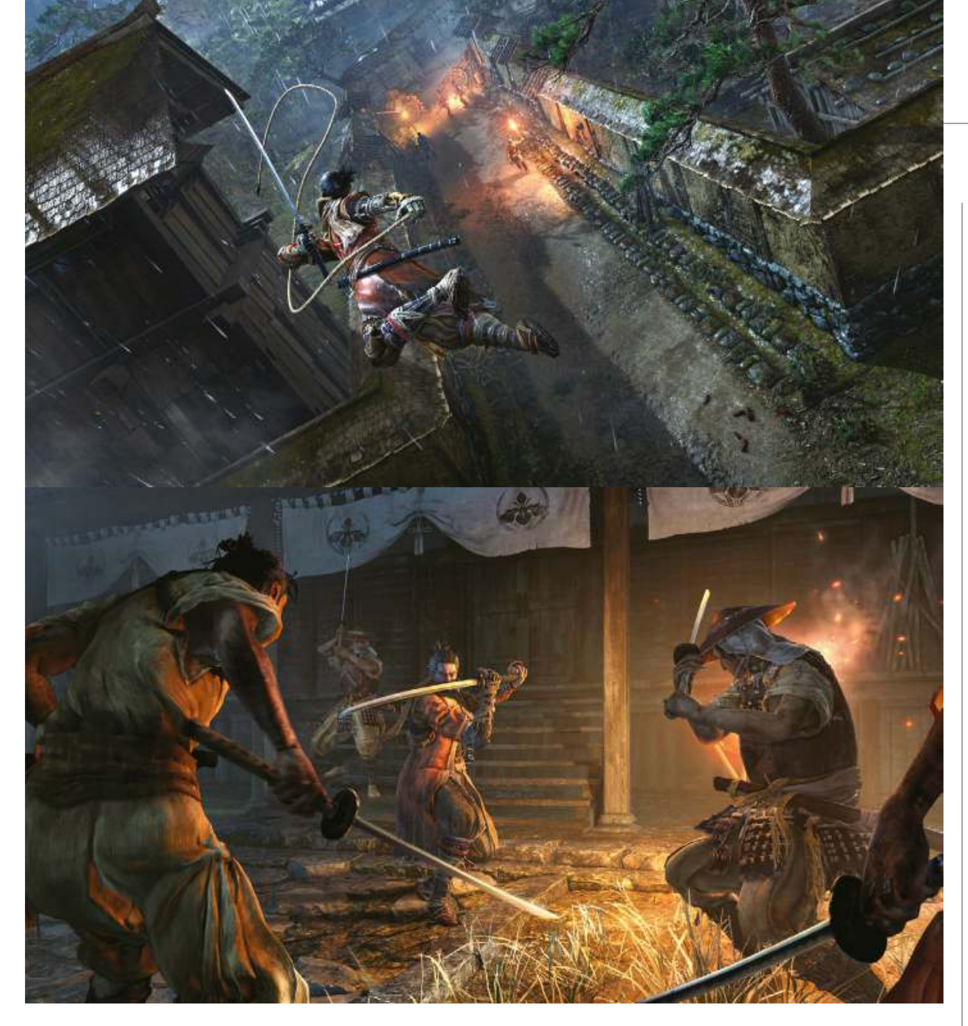
That game turned meticulously planned murder into something of an art form, with its contained sandboxes proving to be the perfect avenue for experimentation and replayability. The studio is promising that *Hitman 2* will expand on the revived series' best elements, promising larger sandbox locations, more ridiculous scenarios and all new ways to achieve the perfect hit. The team is doubling down on its level design, ensuring that there will be more paths forward, more agency over your actions and more depth in the core overlapping systems than was previously offered by its predecessor.

> "BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS OF OUR PREVIOUS GAME, HITMAN 2 INTRODUCES EXCITING NEW FEATURES, NEW MODES AND FRANCHISE FIRSTS TO MAKE FOR A LARGER AND RICHER GAME."
> HAKAN ABRAK, CEO, IO INTERACTIVE

We're also going to throw this out there and let you cast judgement on this design decision – largely because we're still not certain whether it's in the series' best interest or a necessary step backwards – but *Hitman 2* will be doing away with the divisive episodic structure. We appreciated that such a release model gave us the time and space to truly dig into and appreciate the scope of the level design and the wild variety of ways to proceed against your target, but on the other hand the wait between levels could be a bit of a drag. Jury is still out on this one, although IO has confirmed that it is planning to support *Hitman 2* with an array of expansions following its release, sticking to a more familiar (and far less risky) structured DLC rollout for additional content.

We will of course be eager to see how this plays out as we etch closer to the 13 November release date, though for now we are merely ecstatic to know that Agent 47's misadventures have a future. *Hitman* 2016's collected works was one of the best stealth games of the generation, and we can't wait to see where IO takes the action next.







ACTIVISION • FROMSOFTWARE • Q2 2019

SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

FROMSOFTWARE LEAVES DARK SOULS BEHIND

08

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN WHEN GAME DIRECTOR HIDETAKA MIYAZAKI IS GIVEN FREE REIGN TO TAKE A RISK. The annals of videogame history have proven as much – *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*, three titles that have become a force onto themselves. Miyazaki isn't interested in pumping out sequels and he loathes complacency – he's always looking towards what comes next. And what comes next is an outrageous partnership, FromSoftware and Activision joining forces to push us into the world of late 1500s Japan.

"Collaborating with Activision on *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* has been a very exciting experience for us," said Miyazaki. "With *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* many FromSoftware team members, including myself, are thrilled to be exploring themes of Sengoku Japan and the ninja for the first time."

It's certainly a change of style and pace, but you need only see *Sekiro* in action for the briefest of moments to know that it's a perfect fit for the veteran studio. Set in a brutal and bloody period of constant life-and-death conflict, FromSoftware is leveraging the scenario to expand on its combat mechanics and movement systems in an impressive fashion. Vertical traversal comes together with visceral head-to-head battles, driven by wholly bizarre weaponry and some truly terrifying enemies. It looks beautiful, it looks challenging and it looks quintessentially Miyazaki. What more is there to tell you?

> "WITH SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE MANY FROMSOFTWARE TEAM MEMBERS, INCLUDING MYSELF, ARE THRILLED TO BE EXPLORING THEMES OF SENGOKU JAPAN AND THE NINJA FOR THE FIRST TIME"
> HIDETAKA MIYAZAKI, PRESIDENT, FROMSOFTWARE



DEEP SILVER • 4A GAMES • 22 FEB 2019

METRO EXODUS

YOU CAN'T STOP PROGRESS

09

With *Metro Exodus* leaving the claustrophobic tunnels of Moscow's metro system behind, we wondered whether the series – famed for its tense shootouts with makeshift weaponry, haunting atmosphere and taunting enemies – could survive the leap to wide-open spaces. Thankfully, 4A Games is building something truly special here; *Metro Exodus* charts a year in the life of Artyom and a small band of Spartan Rangers, heading east in search of a new beginning. It looks stunning in action, the weapons handle wonderfully and none of the fear and loathing has been lost in the transition. *Metro Exodus* is ambitious, excellent and sure to be one hell of an experience.



SQUARE ENIX • EIDOS MONTRÉAL • 14 SEP 2018

SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER

LARA CROFT STILL ISN'T FEELING LIKE HER OLD SELF

10

The trajectory of the rebooted series has, thus far, been a crash course coming-of-age story that was supposed to detail Lara's ascent from ambitious adventurer to the embrace of her destiny as the Tomb Raider. We aren't quite there yet mind, with *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* seeing Lara marauding through sprawling jungle spaces in an effort to stop a forthcoming Mayan apocalypse. Eidos Montréal – taking over the reigns from Crystal Dynamics – seems to be building a darker, more violent and more solemn game experience here, though only time will tell if it can provide a suitable pay-off to what the trilogy has been slowly building towards.

BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS • 14 NOVEMBER 2018

FALLOUT 76

A BRAVE NEW ENTERPRISE FOR BETHESDA

11

"ABOUT FOUR YEARS AGO WE HIT UPON AN IDEA THAT WAS PERFECT FOR FALLOUT," RECALLS BETHESDA DIRECTOR AND EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TODD HOWARD. "It was an idea that we just couldn't shake; we knew we had to do it, and we had to do it in a big way."

Howard is referring to *Fallout 76*, a bold new initiative from Bethesda Game Studios that's left us reeling. The idea, as he tells it, was to build a Fallout experience around three concepts: it had to be open world; it had to be pinned around survival; it had to be populated by real characters. It's that last one that's ushering in change. It isn't about making the NPCs of the world *feel* more real – this isn't about the progression of artificial intelligence and animation – it's about Bethesda pushing into a new area with a franchise that has a long history of risk taking and evolution. "We have always wanted to tell the story of what it would be like for the first characters that leave the vaults," Howard continues on. "But there is one big difference with this game. Each of these characters is a real person because, yes, *Fallout 76* is entirely online."

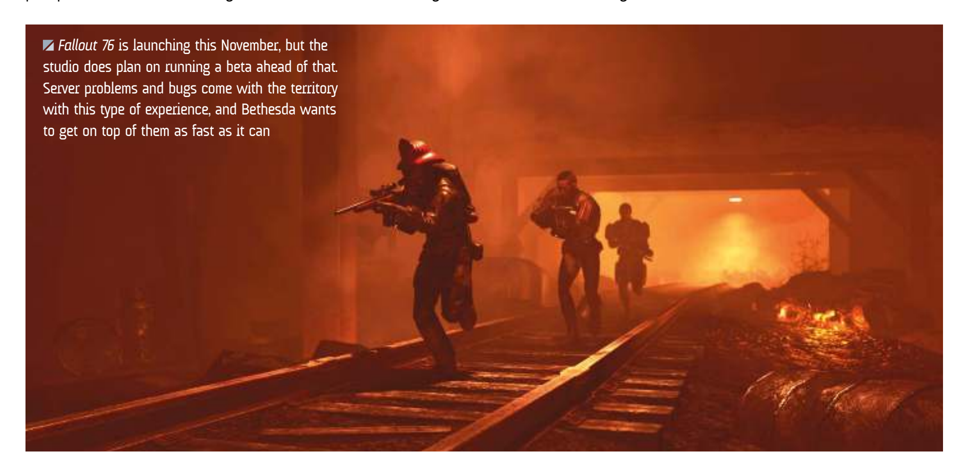
That's right. *Fallout 76* is a spin-off taking aim at the burgeoning online survival genre. Much like *Rust* and *Conan Exiles*, it's a game with crafting, exploration and emergent player experience at the core of it. Only, being that this is a Bethesda game, *Fallout 76* will also feature a heavier emphasis on storytelling and quest lines than perhaps any of its closest competitors. "You'll be who you want to be; exploring a huge world, doing quests, experiencing a story and levelling up. We *love* those things about our games as well and we would not have it any other way. But like so many of you we have always wanted to see what our style of game would be like in multiplayer. So, lots of us talk about the experiences that we have in our games but we've never experienced them together."

Fallout 76 is going to change all of that then. It's a prequel to all of the other games in the series, casting you as a vault dweller charged with rebuilding America after the fallout settles, emerging from the underground 25 years after the bombs fell. Bethesda is whisking us away to West Virginia, to an open world four times the size of *Fallout 4's* by Bethesda's own estimation. It's here where you and a dozen other real players will have the opportunity to work, explore and fight alongside (or against) one another to lay the foundations for the bright future of America.

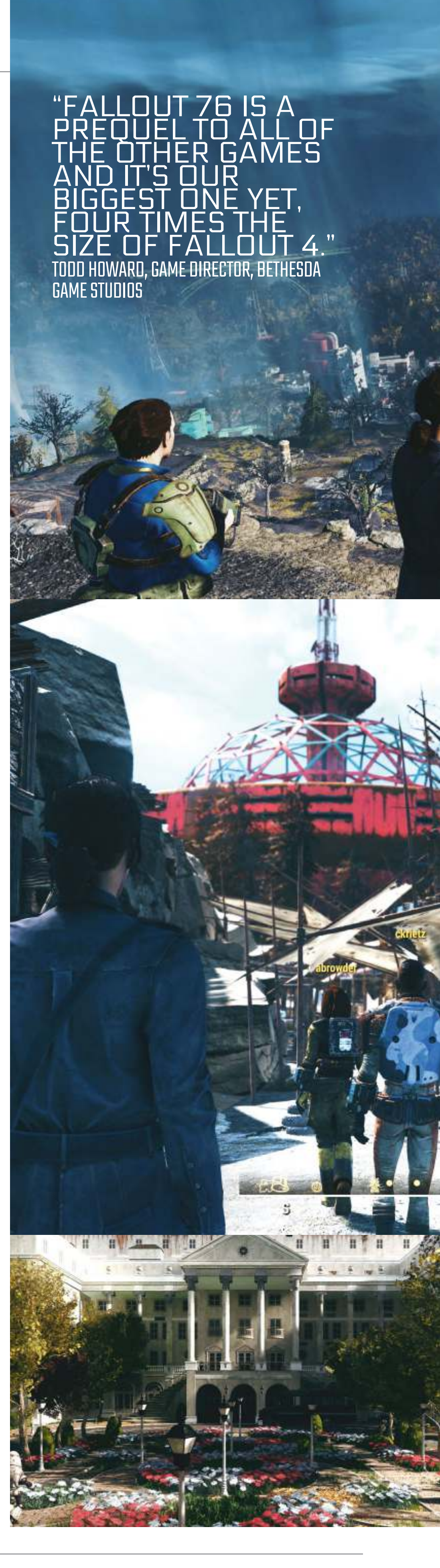
Bethesda has put considerable time and resources into refining and expanding upon the crafting systems introduced in *Fallout 4*, and we are going to see the result of that iteration here. If crafting isn't of interest to you, that's okay – leave it to your friends. If you're looking to explore the wasteland, Howard promises that West Virginia will be the most beautiful landscape from the studio yet. "We always start with the world, and this time it features all new rendering, lighting and landscape technology. It allows us to have sixteen times the detail and even view distant weather systems across the maps."

And if you're into combat, there will be plenty to hold your interest here too. While all NPCs have been stripped out of the game – every human character you meet will be another real player – there will still be an array of mutants, monsters and weird anomalies to do battle with. Bethesda has confirmed that, due to the online-only nature of the experience, traditional V.A.T.S. is out, although it is currently adapting the system to work in real-time. Howard has also promised this will be a "softcore" take on the survival genre, promising that "death never means the loss of progression or the loss of your character."

Fallout 76 is ambitious and divisive by its very nature. It's exactly the type of experience we want to see Bethesda pushing itself to explore and the type of space we are eager to see a big development team experiment on. *Fallout 76* isn't traditionally what we'd expect from Bethesda but that's okay. It's about time we saw some risk taking in the wasteland.

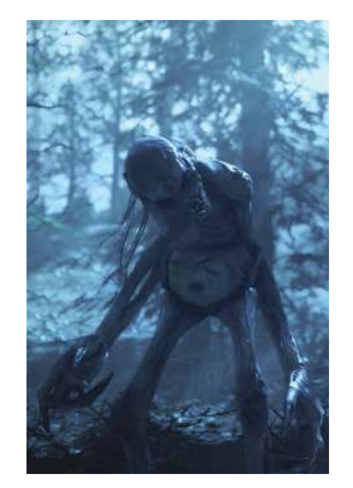


Fallout 76 is launching this November, but the studio does plan on running a beta ahead of that. Server problems and bugs come with the territory with this type of experience, and Bethesda wants to get on top of them as fast as it can



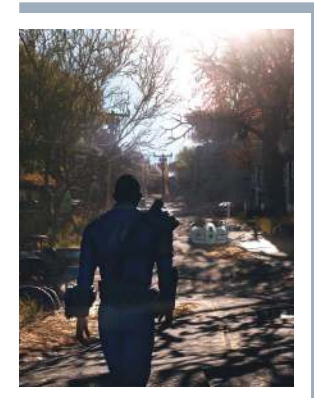
"FALLOUT 76 IS A PREQUEL TO ALL OF THE OTHER GAMES AND IT'S OUR BIGGEST ONE YET, FOUR TIMES THE SIZE OF FALLOUT 4."
TODD HOWARD, GAME DIRECTOR, BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS







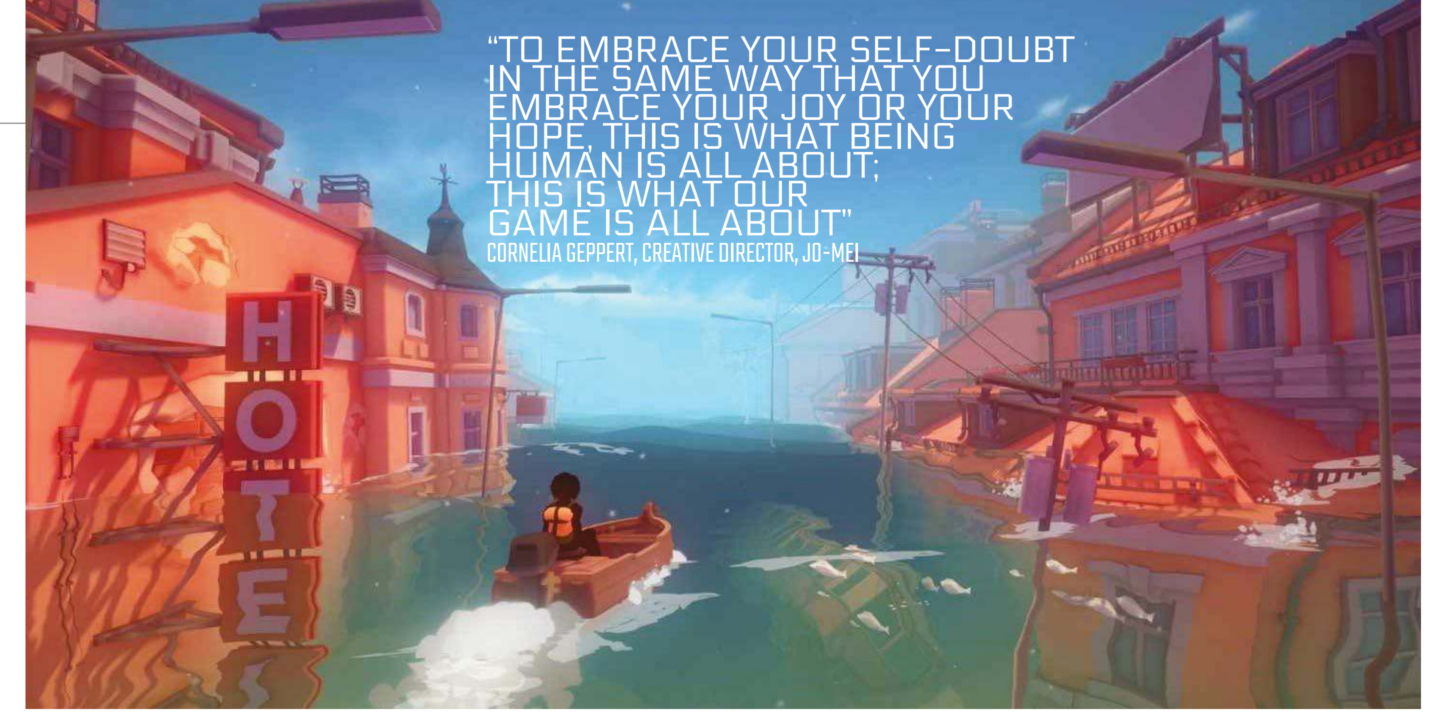
Above Bethesda is going all in on this new multiplayer experience. Todd Howard has confirmed as much, revealing that there are more personnel working on *Fallout 76* than the studio has ever had on one of its projects. **Below** Mod support will be a part of *Fallout 76*, but not at launch. It's an area the studio is committed to working out, though it plans on supporting the game with free and paid DLC in the meantime.



LONE WANDERER

SOLO PLAY COULD BE AN OPTION

While there is no traditional single-player campaign in *Fallout 76*, it will indeed be possible to host a private server of sorts. While Bethesda is currently tweaking its server side support to crack down on harassment and griefing, this could be a viable alternative for those that just wish to play with their buddies or all on their own lonesome. With the game designed around multiplayer it might lose some of its spark – particularly as players will eventually be able to get to the stage in which they can launch tactical nuclear strikes against one another's constructions – but it's certainly nice to know that the option is there. In *Fallout 76* all of your progression goes with you, whatever server you join; death doesn't mean the end of you or your stuff, you'll simply respawn away from your aggressor. This isn't a hardcore survival sim, it's a softer design than its competitors in the space.



"TO EMBRACE YOUR SELF-DOUBT IN THE SAME WAY THAT YOU EMBRACE YOUR JOY OR YOUR HOPE, THIS IS WHAT BEING HUMAN IS ALL ABOUT; THIS IS WHAT OUR GAME IS ALL ABOUT"
CORNELIA GEPPERT, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, JO-MEI

EA · JO-MEI GAMES · Q1 2019

SEA OF SOLITUDE

CONFRONT YOUR FEARS

12

AT E3 2016 ELECTRONIC ARTS UNVEILED ITS EA ORIGINALS INITIATIVE, A PROGRAMME DESIGNED TO CELEBRATE THE PASSION AND TALENT OF THE AMAZING CREATORS THAT CAN BE FOUND IN OUR INDUSTRY. The publisher unveiled its third EA Originals title at this year's EA Play, a beautiful and powerful exploration game called *Sea Of Solitude*.

"When humans get too lonely they turn into monsters. This is at the core of everything that you will see and feel while you are playing *Sea Of Solitude*," says creative director Cornelia Geppert, who notes that she began writing the game when she felt the loneliest in her life – a feeling that not only fuels this exploratory adventure, but one she hopes all players will be able to connect with on some level. "Nearly every human being can at least relate to or remember the feeling of being lonely."

SOS tells the story of a young woman named Kay who suffers from such crippling loneliness that her fears and her hopelessness have materialised into the real world, transforming her into a monster of sorts. In *Sea Of Solitude* you must explore an abandoned, submerged city in an attempt to restore Kay's humanity. Puzzles, platforming and crippling isolation, that's *Sea Of Solitude*, the deeply personal project from independent developer Jo-Mei that will be arriving in 2019.



BANDAI NAMCO · DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT · TBC 2019

TWIN MIRROR

THEY SAY YOU CAN NEVER REALLY RETURN TO THE HOMESTEAD

13

Dontnod continues to experiment in the story-driven adventure space, this time with a psychological thriller. It's got all of the hallmarks of a great David Lynch-inspired enterprise: small-town America with a dark secret, the unreal overlapping with the real to distort perception and a mysterious murder. Choice, consequence and a conflicted protagonist; *Twin Mirror* looks to be the quintessential Dontnod experience.



SONY · SIE BEND STUDIO · 22 FEB 2019

DAYS GONE

THE END OF IT ALL

14

If you've ever wondered what *Far Cry 4* mixed with *Sons Of Anarchy* by way of *The Walking Dead* would look like then you need wonder no longer. *Days Gone* has been delayed into 2019 to give developer SIE Bend Studio a little longer to improve its gorgeous open-world sandbox and refine the systems that drive the impressive hordes of zombies it's pumping onto the screen. Hopefully it will be time well spent.



E-LINK MEDIA · IN-HOUSE · Q1 2019

BEYOND BLUE

A WORLD WORTH SAVING

15

Built in collaboration between E-Link Media, the studio behind *Never Alone*, and the BBC team behind *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet*, *Beyond Blue* is an absolutely breathtaking exploration game set below sea level. The studio wants this to be an educational experience as well as an enjoyable one, teaching players about the importance of preserving the oceans as they dive into the game's mysteries.



CAPCOM • IN-HOUSE • Q1 2019

DEVIL MAY CRY 5

LET'S SEE HOW CRAZY THIS PARTY CAN GET



WE'VE BEEN WAITING SUCH A VERY LONG TIME FOR THIS. It's hard to believe, but it's already been a decade since the release of *Devil May Cry 4*; Capcom knows that talk is cheap, that an apology wouldn't be enough to satisfy our insatiable need for DMC's particular brand of high-octane stylised action. So here we go. Capcom is kicking the party back into gear with a direct sequel to *Devil May Cry 4* – it looks as ridiculous(ly amazing) as you might expect.

Devil May Cry 5 is to feature three playable characters, each of which are to offer radically different stylish play styles, with Nero taking the lead during the reveal; the brash swordsmith has been gifted the iconic neon Devil May Cry shop sign by Dante, and he's used it to establish a mobile devil-hunting agency with a new cohort, Nico. While the studio is yet to confirm the identity of the other two playable characters our bet would be on Dante (seen only briefly thus far, looking a little more partied out than you may remember) and, given returning director Hideaki Itsuno's intent to conclude the Sons Of Sparda saga, his brother Vergil.

There's time to sweat it on the story details later, of course. For now, we're particularly impressed with what Capcom has pulled together. The studio is utilising its proprietary RE Engine to bring an almost-photorealistic graphical style to the action, and advancements to both lighting and environmental effects. The heightened visual fidelity only works to pull sharper focus to the slick animations, out-of-control action and fluid movement. Nero has an impressive array of new combat and tactical opportunities, thanks in large part to the fact that he's still missing that favoured demonic arm of his. This has been replaced, for the time being, with various prosthetic arms (along with the returning Red Queen blade and Blue Rose pistol) that allow the young anti-hero to unleash powerful Devil Break attacks, completely upending his fighting style in new and unpredictable ways. It looks utterly mesmerising in action.

> "I AM CONVINCED THAT THIS IS THE BEST GAME I HAVE EVER MADE, BECAUSE I MADE IT FOR ALL OF YOU, OUR FANS"
> HIDEAKI ITSUNO, GAME DIRECTOR, CAPCOM

The legions of hell are no strangers to this world, but a new kind of demonic invasion is afoot in *Devil May Cry 5*, and you'll need to bring everything you've got to repel the encroaching forces out of Red Grave City – ground zero of the latest assault. Capcom is promising that this entry to the long-running series will be the most technologically advanced, visually impressive and thunderously fast Devil May Cry it has ever released and, you know what, we're believers!

SQUARE ENIX • AVALANCHE STUDIOS • 4 DEC 2018

JUST CAUSE 4

FORECASTS PREDICT PATCHY HEAT WAVE



Rico's one man army routine will be well tested against actual armies as a front line will be present through the game that you can either avoid or contribute to as you progress.

17

IF WE'RE BEING ENTIRELY FRANK, ANOTHER JUST CAUSE ISN'T A PROSPECT THAT WAS EVER GOING TO EXCITE US VERY MUCH. Avalanche has two other projects on the go that are more enticing to us in *Rage 2* and *Generation Zero*. Our overriding feeling about this sequel is why?

Perhaps one reason for the chasm between us and this game is that we feel it's not really aiming itself at us. We enjoyed *Just Cause 3* enough, but we didn't embrace it the way that YouTubers and Twitch streamers did, creating insane videos and challenges that took advantage of the physics driven way the environment was pieced together. Avalanche looks to be leaning hard into appealing to that way of experiencing *Just Cause 4*, so while there's a nominal setup of private military control of a fictional South American nation, what matters is you have more tethers, more control over rockets and everything blows up.

The way that Just Cause has developed over the years, it now feels closer to *Goat Simulator* than GTA. And there's nothing wrong with that. With the tech, tools and insane weather systems this game is adding, it should be a lot of fun, but we're not sure it will appeal to everyone.



SEGA • CREATIVE ASSEMBLY • Q2 2019

TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS

FULL OF EASTERN PROMISE

18

This return to historically inspired tactical warfare is a welcome one. All the more so since the team is bringing even more depth and variety to the experience with some new features. The two key additions to our minds are its use of multiple generals in your leadership and duals. Multiple generals means you can assign leaders who offer specific buffs and tactical options to your different units. That should mean an interesting mix and match approach and some twists on the rock, paper, scissors of battle ahead. While duals give you wonderfully captured one-on-one fights between champions that can have a massive impact on the battle.



10 CHAMBERS COLLECTIVE • IN-HOUSE • TBC 2018

GTFO

TOGETHER IN THE DARK

19

With its *Payday 2* pedigree in the development team *GTFO's* reveal late last year definitely caught our attention. What's been good to see this summer is that it's managing to hit its visual and gameplay targets from that initial trailer and deliver exactly the level of detail and atmosphere it originally promised within the Unity engine. One of the standout elements that wasn't immediately apparent before is how the four-player co-op shooter, heist and survival gameplay moves between assault, stealth and defence in nice waves. You need to progress, you sometimes need to sneak and then you need to hold your ground. The pacing looks fantastic, the visuals are superbly claustrophobic and we're totally on board.



UBISOFT • UBISOFT MONTREAL, SPECTREVISION • Q3 2018

TRANSFERENCE

MIND JUMP SCARES

20

Ubisoft's VR venture with Elijah Wood's film company had us intrigued last year and now it has our full attention. What had at first been merely the promise of a merging of film and games in the virtual space has now been pinned down as something close to *What Remains Of Edith Finch* crossed with *P.T.* As you put the headset on you'll be invited to jump between the minds of family members to piece together the story. But inside the memories is something else, lurking and following you. Gameplay wise it's about exploration and puzzle solving, sometimes finding the right family member to access so that you can progress through the shared memory that is powering this world.



DEVOLVER DIGITAL · CROTEAM · TBC 2018

SERIOUS SAM 4: PLANET BADASS

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

21 Serious Sam wasn't necessarily high on our list of most-wanted sequels… But we have to say that Croteam is pulling out all of the stops to not only make it a fan-pleasing blockbuster, but also deliver a level of spectacle to get even the most jaded FPS fan enticed. The big headline grabber is the potential for 100,000 enemies to be on screen at once. And that wasn't a typo on our part. We meant 100,000 enemies, all gallivanting around. Those headless dudes with the bombs in their hands, the giant demons and everything in-between, all being mowed down with giant guns and potentially a lot of agrarian motorised equipment.

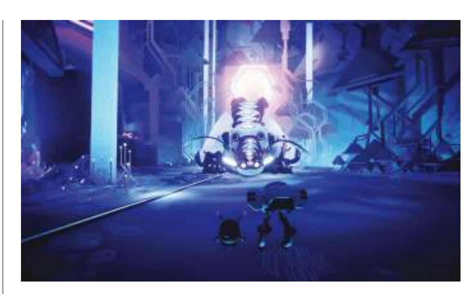


FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE · VOSTOK GAMES · TBC

FEAR THE WOLVES

UNLEASH THE HOUNDS

22 The former S.T.A.L.K.E.R. development team working on a battle royale game? Even with our growing fatigue at every shooter including a 1vs100 mode, we were still very much up for this take on the format. With radiation being the killer factor, the whole experience carries a slightly more realistic feel than the competition and the two paths to victory could be interesting too. You can either kill the competition as usual or be the first and only passenger on an extraction helicopter in the final zone. A nice twist on the format, even if it's a small one. Mutated wildlife offers an additional PvE threat that will keep you on your toes too.



SIE · MEDIA MOLECULE · TBC 2018

DREAMS

TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAMS WORK

23 Every new demo we see seems to only confirm that the versatility and tools of *Dreams* are mind-blowingly superb. One element that stood out to us most recently is the way content can be collated in the game. There's something close to a Pinterest board system for gathering content together so you can collect and share all the best trees or baddies or rock shapes you've found for others to tap into. So, even if you're not a great object or character maker yourself, you can play a part in making *Dreams* an interesting platform to make and experience games in, which we like a lot. It looks like something quite unique and we're looking forward to dipping our toes in.

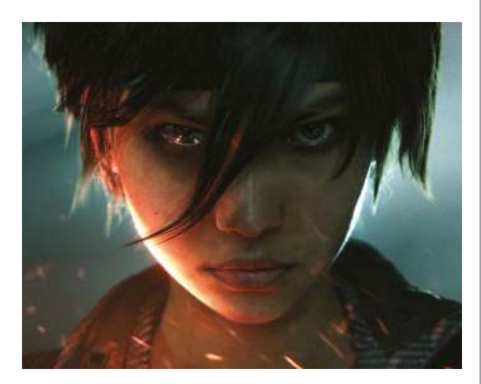


MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS · MOON STUDIOS · TBC 2019

ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

MORE OF A GOOD THING

24 What can Moon Studios possibly do next? *Ori And The Blind Forest* is, without question, one of the best 2D adventure games of the generation, driven by a beautiful story and pixel-perfect platforming – following that kind of success isn't easy. That all said, Moon seems to have no problem in this respect; *Ori And The Will Of The Wisps* is an excellent follow-up that only improves and expands on everything achieved by the original. The team is looking to deliver the perfect Metroidvania experience and, given the quality of the original game we have no reason to doubt it will do it again.



UBISOFT · UBISOFT MONTPELLIER · TBC 2019

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

WE'RE LEFT WITH MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

25 Ubisoft, you can't just do this to us. After a decade of pulling a 'will they, won't they?' on us over the return of *Beyond Good & Evil*, Ubisoft Montpellier finally confirmed that a prequel is in the works at last year's E3. So, what did it decide to do in 2018? It showed a little of the game, a sprawling and wildly ambitious action-adventure RPG that's designed to be played in solo or with friends in co-op as you look to seamlessly explore the galaxy. It also confirmed that both Pey'j and Jade will make an appearance, though the latter now seems to be pinned as the villain… our hearts can't take it.



The Crea-ture Studios team is based in Montreal and its founders are self-confessed skating fiends. One of them more on paper than in reality, but we can certainly empathise with that.

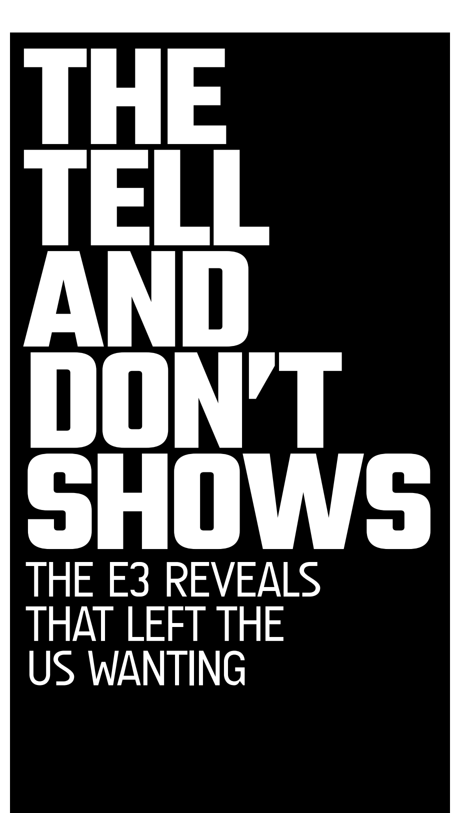
CREA-TURE STUDIOS · IN-HOUSE · TBC 2019

SESSION

WHO NEEDS SKATE 4 ANYWAY?

26 **IF YOU WANT SOMETHING DONE RIGHT, THEN YOU'VE GOT TO DO IT YOURSELF.** That's the ethos at the heart of *Session*, Crea-ture Studios' debut project inspired by the golden era of skateboarding culture that emerged in the early Nineties. If EA isn't going to give us the Skate reboot we've been screaming ourselves hoarse over for years then we will happily turn our attention elsewhere.

Session charts a sharp line away from the arcade-style of skateboarding games of the past, reimagining the dual-stick control scheme to bring more authenticity to the feel and flow of the game. Much like the Skate games, *Session*'s controls give you full autonomy over your actions on the deck, with each stick controlling a foot to give you intuitive control over your tricks. After a successful Kickstarter campaign, it's great to see the game in action and progressing through development so fantastically – it's slick and fluid, a skateboarding game based on skill and precision rather than blind luck. The studio is promising authentic recreations of some of the most legendary skating spots on the planet, as well as a full capture mode – with a VHS aesthetic, of course – that lets you film your friends in action, cut together the most bodacious tricks and gnarly bails before sharing it all out with the world. *Session* is hitting Early Access on PC and Xbox Game Preview before the end of 2018, with a full release scheduled for 2019.





ID SOFTWARE • BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • TBC 2019

DOOM ETERNAL

27 id Software unleashed one of the best FPS games of the generation in 2016's *DOOM*. A sequel was inevitable, we just didn't expect to see it teased so soon. Following on directly from where its predecessor left off, *DOOM Eternal* will see you tearing apart the legions of hell that have invaded Earth. Expect id to move into full production once it wraps development of *Rage 2*.



BETHESDA • BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • TBC 2019

STARFIELD

28 This has been a long time coming. *Starfield* is Bethesda Game Studios' first attempt at a new IP in 25 years; it's a RPG set in space and it's been in some form of production for over five years now… and that's about all we know! The studio has confirmed that it's a long way off, with Bethesda working on some truly innovative, next-generation technology to power it.



BETHESDA • BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • TBC 2020

THE ELDER SCROLLS VI

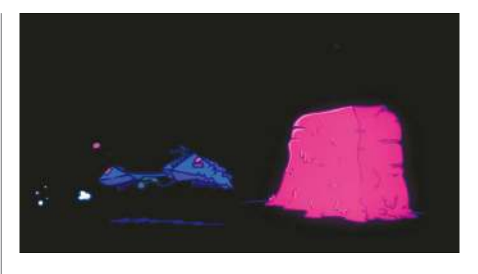
29 Bethesda, sick of people asking about it, has only confirmed that *The Elder Scrolls VI* is in pre-production. It's hugely exciting to know that the studio is already thinking about the next *Elder Scrolls* experience but it's likely that we won't be seeing this one again for a while. Bethesda has committed to getting *Fallout 76* and *Starfield* out before it begins to put this into full pre-production.



IN-HOUSE • SQUARE ENIX • TBC 2019

THE QUIET MAN

30 *The Quiet Man* is a bizarre concept that has us wondering whether Square Enix is attempting to quietly reboot *The Bouncer*; set in the streets of New York City, this all-new IP is going to blend full live-action sequencing with more traditional animated gameplay, a movie-length production that is being billed by the company as a "cinematic action experience".



TBC • MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS • TBC 2019

BATTLETOADS

33 Fans of Battletoads have pushed a sequel into development by sheer force of will alone. Little was detailed by Microsoft – we don't even have a development team attached to it yet – although the publisher has confirmed that it will feature 2.5D platforming, hand-drawn art assets and support three-player couch co-op.



RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT • EA • Q4 2019

JEDI FALLEN ORDER

32 If you're wondering what *Titanfall* developer Respawn Entertainment has been up to for the last two years, you'll be happy to learn that the studio is hard at work on three projects. One of these is *Jedi Fallen Order*, a first-person Star Wars experience set between *Revenge Of The Sith* and *A New Hope,* a bleak period in the timeline that'll detail how the last Jedi are wiped out.



GAME FREAK • THE POKÉMON COMPANY/NINTENDO • Q3 2019

POKÉMON 2019

31 Game Freak has confirmed that Nintendo Switch owners will receive an all-new 'core' Pokémon RPG in 2019. The team is hard at work overhauling key systems and designing creatures for us to capture, pushing its vision to deliver a spectacular experience. The *Pokémon Let's Go* games coming later this year will give us a taste of what Game Freak is cooking up.

THE POWER OF A KISS

HEROICS, VIOLENCE AND GRAPHICS TOOK A BACK-SEAT TO TEENAGE ROMANCE FOR SONY AT E3

BIG, IMPORTANT, SOCIALLY IMPACTFUL MOMENTS IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY DON'T COME ALONG OFTEN AND THEY DON'T TEND TO HAPPEN ON A STAGE. For that, among other reasons, the latest reveal of *The Last Of Us: Part II* gameplay was a seismic moment for the industry and all it took was a kiss.

So, why was Ellie kissing Dina during a dance important? Why has it lead to more column inches, blog posts and reaction videos than the graphically violent gameplay has done? To our minds, and the reason why we've chosen to focus on it here too, it's because it marks a new milestone for the representation of LGBT characters in videogames and the growing inclusiveness of game developers to reach beyond cis-gendered white men for its leads.

Now, that doesn't mean that having somebody other than a cis-gendered white male character makes your game inherently better and it doesn't mean that choosing such a protagonist makes a game inherently bad. The positive reaction to this character development for Ellie has nothing to do with what we believe the final quality of *The Last Of Us: Part II* will be (although based on all relevant evidence, our hopes are high). What it has to do with is offering a perspective we've not experienced before. It's something new for the industry and that's exciting.

For many gamers – we're going to stick our necks out and say millions – seeing the lead character of a major first party exclusive game be an openly gay woman is revelatory, more so given that this is just an aspect of who Ellie is and not the entire focus of the game she's going to star in. And that's important, because a common complaint regarding the portrayal and appearance of LGBT characters in games and, in fact, pretty much all entertainment media is that when they do appear, their gender identity or sexuality is the only important thing about them in the story. To have *The Last Of Us: Part II* seemingly break from that ongoing tradition is a pivotal part of the milestone.

And then there's the tone of the scene, portrayed so well with motion capture and the performances of Ashley Johnson (returning as Ellie) and Shannon Woodward (who some may know from Westworld). It was intimate and relatable. A classic piece of awkward teenage romance shot through with tenderness and humanity. Juxtaposed with the violent gameplay that would follow, it only made this quiet moment of self-reflection feel more pointedly touching and humanising. For those of us who played the original game, seeing a fleeting moment of happiness for Ellie after everything she's seen, done and experienced means a great deal.

And perhaps that's really the most important thing about all of this; we care about Ellie. Her story, her place in the world, how she feels about herself, have actually been built up in our minds as things we care about and so seeing her have a crush on someone and having that reciprocated feels very personal. That the relationship is between two women is not so important to the story, but it is important to those of us watching who haven't seen that aspect of our lives reflected back to us in the games we play.

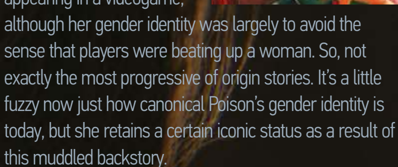
Ultimately, just as inclusivity and representation in videogames aren't silver bullets that automatically make a game good, so narrative maturity doesn't guarantee a strong final outcome. Naughty Dog could mess this one up horribly, but for the moment, and given everything we've seen this developer release in the past, we feel a great deal of hope not only for the final product that *The Last Of Us: Part II* will become, but also for our heroine in this story and the way it is going to lift and empower those of us who have not been spoken to so directly as this game is going to do. And if you're not one of those players, then at least you'll get to experience a story and character you've not been able to embody before. How often have you ever been able to say that?

LGBT EVOLUTION

THE CHANGING FACE OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN GAMES

If you were to look up a comprehensive list of LGBT characters in videogames you would find it to be quite long, especially with a lot of more recent releases trying to bring greater representation to its roster of story characters and NPCs, but just as important as representation is the role such characters get to play and that's been evolving too.

POISON
FINAL FIGHT, 1989



An early example of a transgender character appearing in a videogame, although her gender identity was largely to avoid the sense that players were beating up a woman. So, not exactly the most progressive of origin stories. It's a little fuzzy now just how canonical Poison's gender identity is today, but she retains a certain iconic status as a result of this muddled backstory.

FLEA
CHRONO TRIGGER, 1995



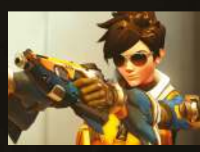
An antagonist for the heroes of Square's famous RPG (as so many gender queer characters have tended to be over the years) Flea is considered to be gender fluid declaring, at one point: "Male or female, what difference does it make? Power is beautiful, and I've got the power." It's not examined in any greater detail than that, however.

IRON BULL
DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION, 2014

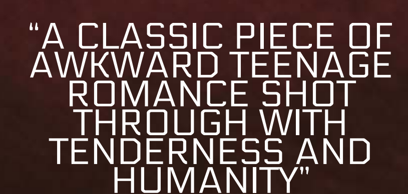


BioWare has been working with LGBT characters for many years now, but more often than not such characters were default bisexual, making them romantically available to our player character regardless of our gender. That position has evolved though with strictly gay and lesbian characters as well as the openly pansexual Iron Bull.

TRACER
OVERWATCH, 2016



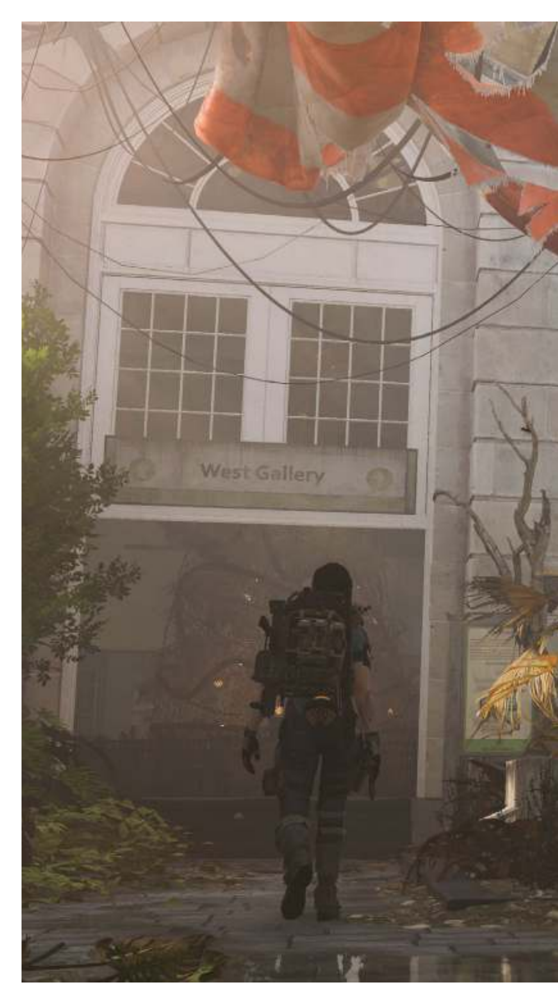
While her background isn't explored to any great degree within the game, *Overwatch*'s cover star and most iconic champion was revealed to be a lesbian in an *Overwatch* comic that depicted her at home with her girlfriend. Given the ancillary nature of this reveal Blizzard hasn't exactly put Tracer's sexuality front and centre, but she is the face of the game and that's pretty special.







The Division 2 doesn't have a 'character casually closing a car door as he walks past' moment yet, but it remains visually very impressive. Some of the effects are really quite outstanding, such as the remote-control mine skimming through water.



UBISOFT • MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT • 15 MARCH 2019

THE DIVISION 2

NO POLITICS PLEASE; THIS IS CLANCY

34

THERE'S BEEN SOME DISCUSSION ABOUT THE POLITICAL STANCE OF *THE DIVISION 2.* Less about what message it's trying to convey, more just along the lines of 'is it actually saying anything?' As with the first game, *The Division 2* is set in a post-apocalyptic America, wiped out after a virus (initially spread via the handling of cash) has eliminated much of the population. The sequel takes things to the nation's capital. Washington DC. And it's based on the literary world of one Tom Clancy, who was never a man to shy away from politicising his work, regardless of the message it carried.

It shouldn't be a point anyone has to argue, and it shouldn't be something Ubisoft feels the need to play down or deny – political statements in games are a sign of the medium maturing and should be welcomed with open arms. Frankly, this is all something we want to get into in more detail and you can read our thoughts about it on page 42 of this very issue.

Still, let's put that debate to one side for the moment and soldier on into the world of *The Division 2* – what is Massive Entertainment doing to make this sequel a cut above the surprisingly long-tailed original? Largely, it seems, sticking to the script, but at the same time incorporating all the lessons it learned working on the first game and how ut turned that into something people played – and continued to play – for years after its release. On first play it feels less like an out-and-out sequel, and more like an update built on solid foundations, which given the series connection to being a living game experience, makes a lot of sense.

The Division 2 is set seven months after the fall of earthly societies, and we're starting to see an element of stability returning to many regions. Small societies have formed, living arrangements are recognisable, there are even farms being built to provide crops for the (limited) masses. But civilisation as we know it no longer exists, and the moral, ethical, social or legal codes most of us live by have been all but forgotten by a large subsection of the population. Basically, there's still trouble out there, and there's still a fight going on to restore order and to figure out just how we can all band together and fix this gigantic mess.

Once again, while *The Division 2* is heavy on its multiplayer aspect, there is the chance to play alone – and once again, it's not the best way to play the game. No, you'll be looking to make your way through the story in a group, your small team tackling missions together and unravelling the Clancy-inspired story (in the broader Clancy-oeuvre sense, since this is not based on any specific writing of his). And that's where things – while feeling intimately familiar – become far more interesting.

The original game stumbled over its feet at the endgame. As players levelled up and reached the crescendo they were rewarded with… not much aside from the ability to keep on playing. In *The Division 2*, Massive is making a concerted effort to make people *want* to play beyond the initial 30 character levels – there are a few methods behind this push, but one of the biggest is via the introduction of specialisations.

These three archetypes open up when the player hits level 30 and offer a bunch of new elements to keep



The location of Washington DC will offer some interesting shooter challenges with a lot more open spaces than Mahattan. The military presence in the city might well play into likely supply destinations.



CAPITAL CONFLICT

WHAT THE NEW LOCATION OFFERS

The original game brought with it the usual feelings associated with New York (specifically Manhattan) – overwhelming vertical size; claustrophobia; dark, dank streets; a real *edge* to things. It was a beautiful, wintery world, but we're glad Massive has moved things to Washington DC for *The Division 2*.

The US capital is much flatter a city, with far fewer highrise buildings dotted around – as well as some truly iconic homes of American democracy – so it immediately lends itself to a less condensed feeling. The world is 20 per cent larger than in the first game, true, but even without knowing that it immediately *feels* a lot bigger and more open than before.

There's also the change in season to consider – the original was in the winter: it was cold and hostile. *The Divsion 2* almost approaches some level of optimism with its summery setting – bright, vivid colours, far fewer furry collars being worn and sunshine brightening up what is otherwise a fundamentally bleak life to live. It's an atmospheric change to the series that works, and helps to set the sequel apart from its forebear, even if the general mechanics remain largely the same.

you interested even after playing a while, the main one being signature weapons. We were privy to the first few specialisations in a hands-on demo, with our character operating as a demolitionist – sporting a grenade launcher as her signature – while teammates went into battle as either a survivalist – wielding a crossbow – or a sharpshooter – favouring a sniper rifle.

> "WE'VE BEEN WORKING WITH THE TEAMS TO BRING A LOT OF CONTENT AT LAUNCH AND TO BE READY TO CONTINUE TO SUPPLY CONTENT A LOT DURING THE YEARS THAT FOLLOW THE LAUNCH"
> YVES GUILLEMOT, UBISOFT CEO

While the mission we played wasn't quite enough to show how much impact on the core game these specialisations will have, they were fun to play about with and Ubisoft has promised endgame challenges for teams of specialists requiring smart use of their abililtes, which sounds nice.

What we *were* able to pick up on during our mission – in which we were tasked with taking a control point located around a downed Air Force One – was what has changed in the basics of *The Division 2*. It's still a third-person, cover-based shooter where you face off against waves of enemies and plentiful bullet sponges, but the new setting of DC has fundamentally altered how missions play out.

The claustrophobia of New York is gone, and battles feel much bigger because of it – the maps are also much more open, meaning you're able to engage in more tactical thinking in a firefight, but so can the AI. We witnessed on more than one occasion (and were taken down on more than one occasion) the enemy flanking players, drawing fire, splitting up and sneaking around the sides. It's a small tweak, but one that adds a huge amount of vitality to encounters – you're always having to shift your view to see what's coming or to be mindful of those around you, and it works well.

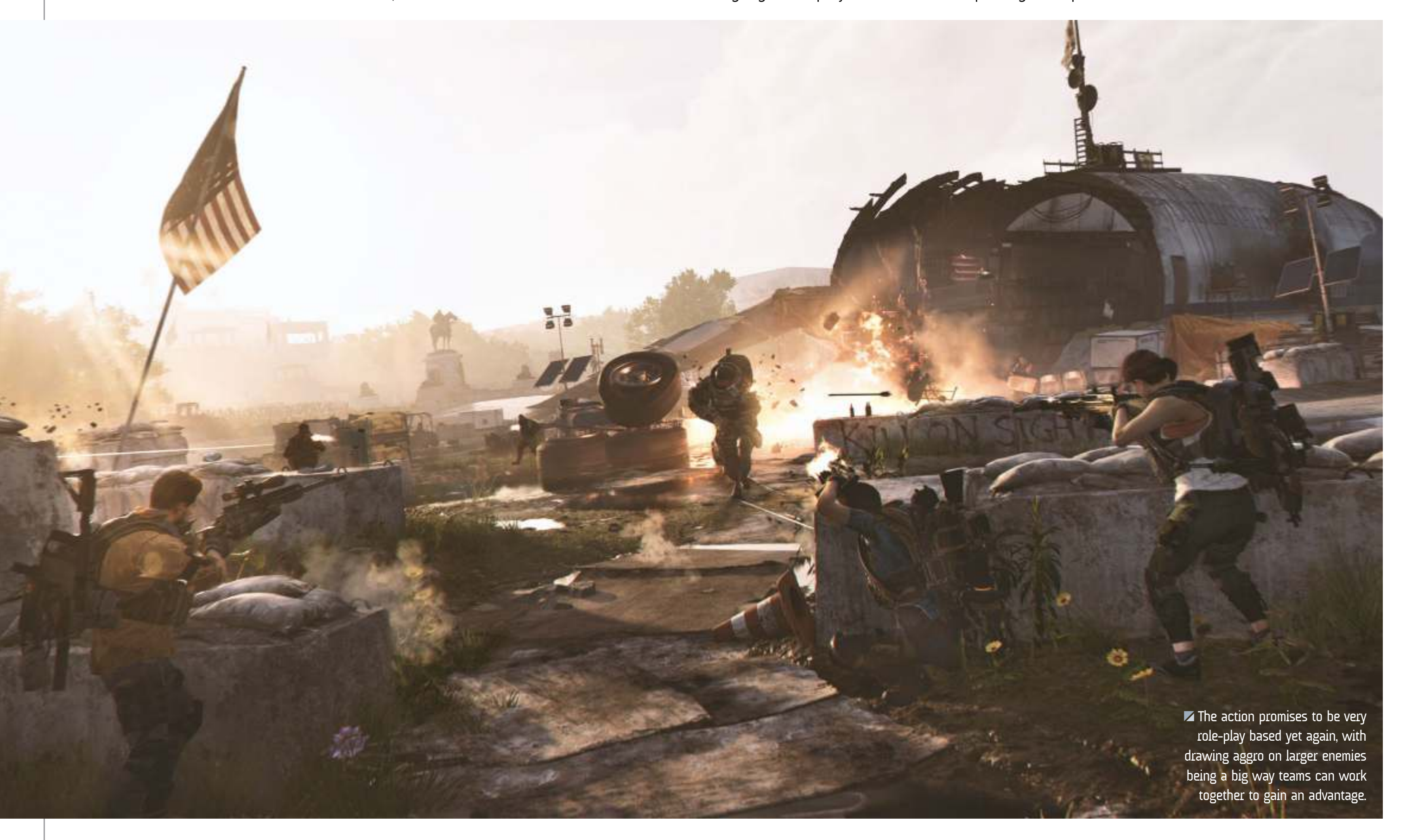
Those you're facing off against haven't just got an upgrade in the smarts either, with *The Division 2* introducing new enemy types to face off against. The foam-spraying grunt – shooting cascading waves of what looks like insulation foam in order to slow the player down – was unexpected, almost comical, but the addition of a medic for the AI is a smart move. It's a dangerous unit not because of the weaponry it carries, but because once on the battlefield there's a chance for foes to be revived and put back into the fight. It became very quickly apparent the medic is a high-value target – but it's not always easy to take them out when you're under fire from a dozen other enemies (and one with a foam cannon spraying all over you).

Fortunately you can call on help in a couple of new ways – first, through the addition of NPC combatants on your team who can be radioed in at certain points. They're not much in the way of fighters from what we saw, but they certainly do a good job of drawing enemy fire. There are also the new gadgets for players to mess about with – a seeker mine that follows the closest enemy, an assault drone that can be remotely controlled, a chem launcher that shoots offensive chemicals like acid, but also healing nanobots and 'the wasp hive', that sees tiny drones attacking an enemy – ideal for harassing someone who needs their health chipped away at consistently over a short period of time.

There are additions to the wider game too, not just the moment-to-moment gunplay. The Dark Zone returns, as you would expect, though at the time of writing there hasn't been much detail about the compelling mode from the original and how it's being updated. Honestly, it could be largely left alone and still be great, as the incredible risk/reward mix of the PvP online region was one of *The Division*'s absolute best parts, improving with updates.

There will be eight-player raids added to *The Division 2* as well, in another move from Massive to shore up the endgame and make sure people are playing well beyond the first few months, or even years. Again, details are light here, but it's safe to assume the devs are looking towards the likes of Destiny for inspiration – while a vocal minority might criticise the game, there's no denying how popular its raids have been over the years. Upping the team to eight players makes sense too, and it's a smart move from Massive.

The Division 2 looks like it's making all the right moves a sequel should – though it's not blown us away as of yet, the fundamentals are in place and the team making it is clear in its goal to avoid the mistakes of last time around. If we can just sort out whether or not the whole thing is apolitical that would make the package complete.



The action promises to be very role-play based yet again, with drawing aggro on larger enemies being a big way teams can work together to gain an advantage.



LEGO DC SUPER-VILLAINS

35



Not much out of the ordinary about this new LEGO action game from Traveller's Tales, apart from the fact that it will be DC's villains taking centre stage rather than its heroes. Plus you'll be tasked with creating your own villain to join the large rogues' gallery of baddies you'll get to hop between.

TEAM SONIC RACING

36



We were very impressed the last time Sumo tackled a Sonic karting game, with a final product that could give Mario and pals a run for their money. The new twist is team-based racing, something akin to modern racing competitions like F1 where team points are accrued as well as individual honours, but with added co-op mechanics.

DEAD OR ALIVE 6

37



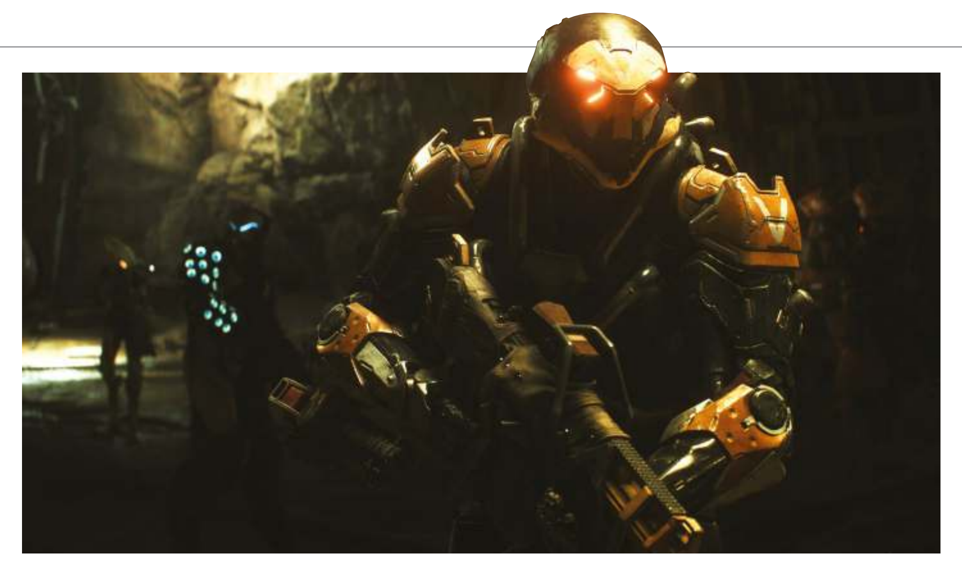
Team Ninja is arriving with a curious promise with its sixth instalment in the long-running 3D fighter: to cut down on the T and A. For a series synonymous with the excesses of 'breast physics' and beachside bikini photoshoot modes, more realistic body physics and practical costumes are being promised by the team. This may be a DoA game to take seriously.

TETRIS EFFECT

38



If it weren't for the fact that *Rez* and *Lumines* creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi is involved in development of this game, we're not sure the promise of VR Tetris would have had us that excited. However, his commitment to visually arresting and musically driven gameplay is very enticing. This is definitely a Tetris game worth tracking.



EA • BIOWARE • 22 FEBRUARY 2019

ANTHEM

A BOLD EXPERIMENT BUILT ON SOLID FOUNDATIONS

39

BIOWARE REALLY IS VERY GOOD AT WORLD BUILDING. Now that we've heard a little more about the planet on which *Anthem* is set (apart from its actual name, which isn't being revealed just yet) and the context in which you will be exploring it, we're even more deeply taken with the concept than before. And we were pretty taken with it to begin with as you may recall from a year ago. While seeing BioWare release a game that isn't a single-player-focused RPG carries with it some disappointment, getting to see how it is embellishing and evolving a shared-world experience with its narrative expertise really redresses the balance for us. And as we say, the set-up for this shared world feels very promising.

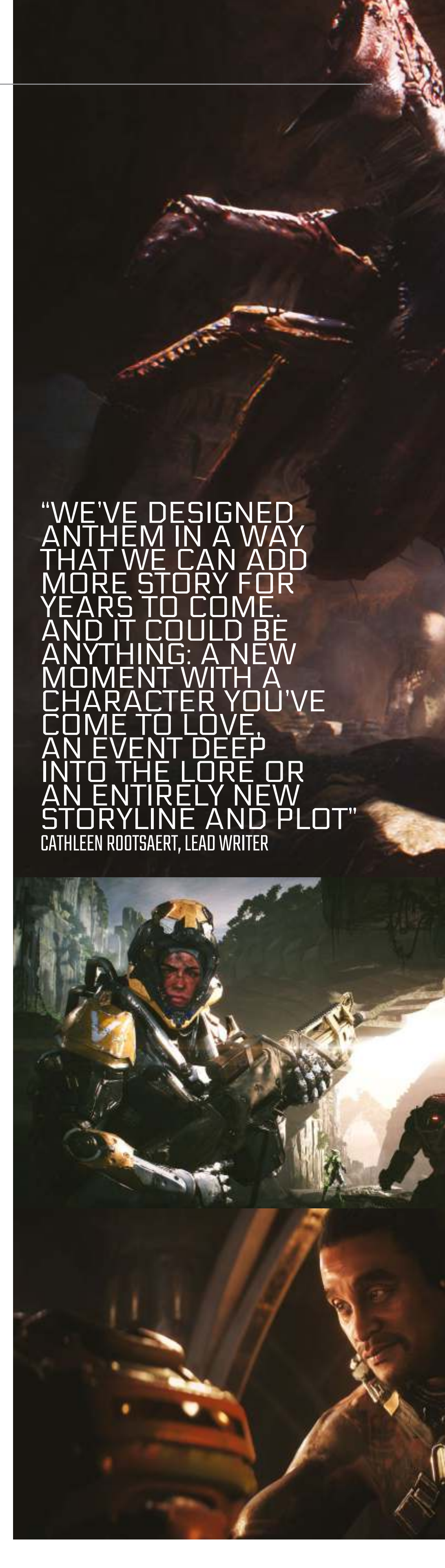
The core concept is that this planet has been abandoned by its gods, but while the presence of an all-powerful deity figure may be a point of debate and faith in other worlds, here it's quite literal. The Shapers used giant machines to craft the world, but seemingly left halfway through, abandoning their tools as they scarpered. These machines were tuned to use something called the Anthem Of Creation to build the planet, but having left the tech behind it is now sporadically interacting with the Anthem and creating all sorts of hazards and world-shaping problems (intense and destructive weather systems being the first example we've seen).

What's more the humans on this planet aren't really built to survive this environment, hence needing the javelins to get around outside of hub cities like your base Fort Tarsis. BioWare has clarified that while the people here are human, they are not of Earth. Neither is this planet a version of Earth. And while humanity has clearly made some technological advancements, it is not a particularly advanced society. Having had access to Shaper tech for so long it has crafted things like the javelins and strider, your walking forward-operations base, but these were hand-crafted by experts, not mass produced. It all reminds us a little of the Krogan from Mass Effect, given access to space-faring technology too soon in their societal evolution.

Anyway, this all has us highly intrigued, giving this world plenty of mysterious lore that can be fed into or not, helping to drive new directions and narratives going forward. And as far as narrative goes we're equally intrigued to see how BioWare balances its approach. While the open world can be shared with others, your story is your own, and when you enter the strider or Fort Tarsis, that's your time to engage with NPCs and make decisions about how the mainline narrative is going to play out for you. Out in the world, everything is shared, from the weather systems passing through to the events taking place, but back at base, that's just yours. It's almost the inverse of something like the *The Division* where bases were the social hubs and the streets were more isolated, and it should mean you can delve deeper into relationships and plot paths this way.

This is also where you'll be able to customise your experience through the design and loadouts of your javelins. As previously discussed, you can have more than one exo-suit to pick from, allowing you to essentially switch between classes depending on the needs of the mission and/or the balance of your squad, but you can also embellish and personalise them with paint jobs and cosmetic items. We've seen some examples of the variety on offer here and it is vast. From garish graffiti styles to recreating the N7 armour, your javelin can really stand out, even if you line up in a full squad of Rangers or Interceptors.

Anthem showed promise at its reveal, and now it's nailing down those all-important details, proving how it will bridge the gap between shared-world shooter and BioWare role-player. The result will be something else entirely, but we like where it's headed.



"WE'VE DESIGNED ANTHEM IN A WAY THAT WE CAN ADD MORE STORY FOR YEARS TO COME. AND IT COULD BE ANYTHING: A NEW MOMENT WITH A CHARACTER YOU'VE COME TO LOVE, AN EVENT DEEP INTO THE LORE OR AN ENTIRELY NEW STORYLINE AND PLOT"
CATHLEEN ROOTSAERT, LEAD WRITER



LEARNING LESSONS

BIOWARE IS TACKLING ITS DETRACTORS HEAD ON

BioWare has found itself between the rock of a poor reception to *Mass Effect Andromeda* and the hard place of being an EA studio, as many gamers hold the publisher as public enemy number one in the field of squeezing us for money. But the team has talked very well about how it hopes to not only implement crucial feedback from *Andromeda*, but also avoid the pitfalls of making an online experience under the EA banner, most recently highlighted by the launch of *Star Wars Battlefront II*. For a start, while there are microtransactions, they are cosmetic only and for specific items, not blind loot boxes. And there will never be paid-for content that will strengthen or enhance players released down the line. Solid decisions all around as far as we're concerned, acknowledging that these sorts of items help keep a living gameworld viable for continued support, but avoiding accusations of pay-to-win tactics.

NINTENDO • SORA LTD, HAL LABORATORY, BANDAI NAMCO • 7 DEC 2018

SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE

SPARE A THOUGHT FOR WALUIGI

40

AFTER BEING TEASED BACK IN APRIL, FANS WONDERED HOW NINTENDO'S APPROACH FOR THE SWITCH EDITION OF A SUPER SMASH BROS. GAME WOULD TURN OUT. The answer came in the reveal trailer, the words "Everyone Is Here" letting players know that nothing was off limits in this new era. *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* plans to live up to that name and become the ultimate Smash experience.

Every character from past Smash games is on the Ultimate roster. Mainstays like Mario and Link, previously removed characters like Ice Climbers and Solid Snake, even the Wii U's craziest DLC inclusions Ryu from Street Fighter and Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VII* will be available. Each character has seen some adjustments for this new game, the number of which Nintendo claims is in the "tens of thousands."

There are some new faces joining the fight too, with *Splatoon*'s Inkling and the space pirate Ridley from Metroid staking their claims as playable offerings. Both characters add a bit of spice to the battle, with Inkling's coloured ink increasing damage taken by the foes it touches and Ridley using his giant frame and flame breath to punish enemies.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's impressive scale will keep fans smashing for months after its 7 December launch, and who knows how much more will be added between now and then.





MICROSOFT STUDIOS • SUMO DIGITAL • FEBRUARY 2019

CRACKDOWN 3

THE OFT-DELAYED SHOOTER IS FINALLY COMING SOON

41

Announcing a delay before E3 is never easy, particularly when it's a game as maligned as *Crackdown 3*. What was first announced at E3 2014 is still not on shelves, but Microsoft promises that will change in February 2019. A new trailer showed more of the futuristic action we've expected, but without it in our hands it's tough to get excited.



BANDAI NAMCO • IN-HOUSE • 19 OCTOBER 2018

SOULCALIBUR VI

WELCOMING US BACK TO HISTORY'S STAGE

42

Soulcalibur VI brings the storied sword fighting franchise back to the forefront, adding new techniques and new faces. The Reversal Edge system rewards solid defence play, and the Critical Edge blow can quickly decide a battle. The Witcher's Geralt of Rivia makes a fantastic guest character, fitting into the universe seamlessly. This tale of souls and swords is already impressive.



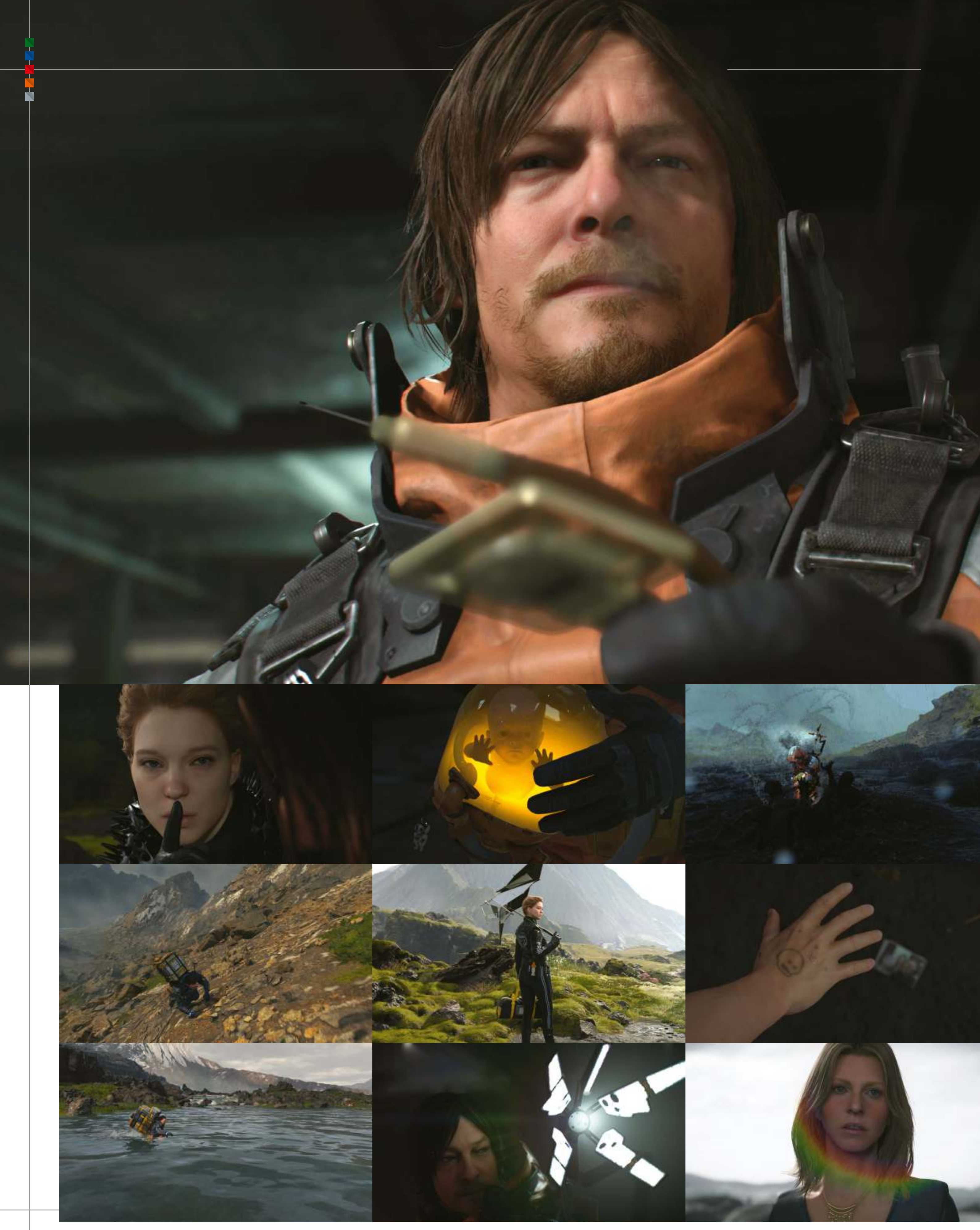
FINJI • ANDREW SHOULDICE • TBC 2018

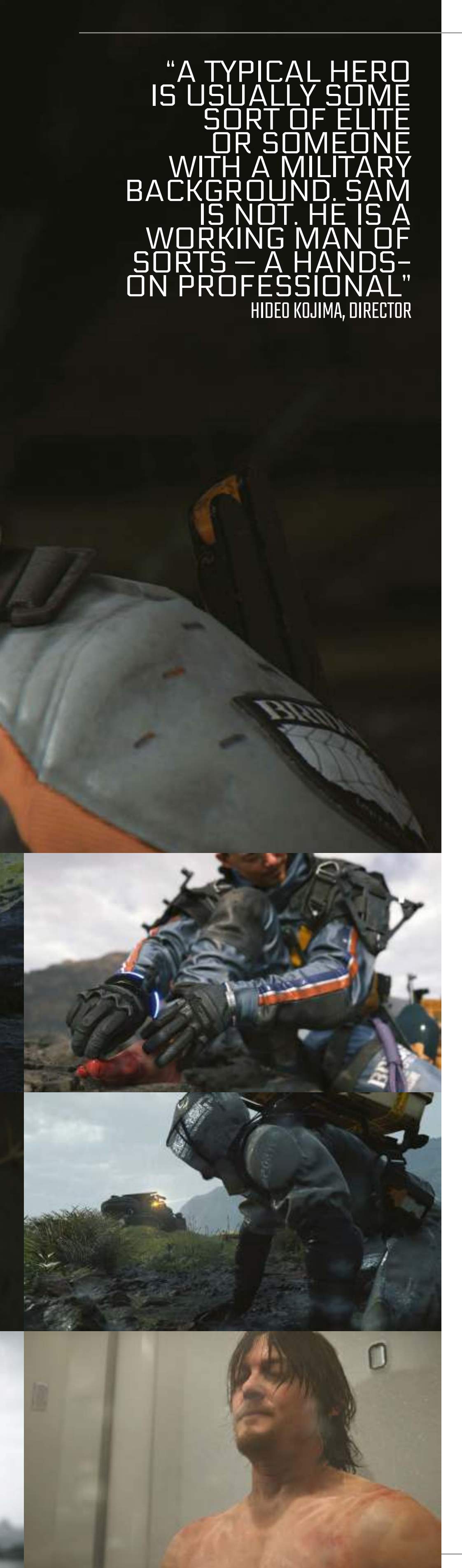
TUNIC

A STANDOUT INDIE ADVENTURE THAT EVOKES A LEGEND

43

Tunic is the result of taking the original *Legend of Zelda*, removing the elfen boy and replacing him with an adorable fox. The gameplay calls back to classic Zelda, with incredible aesthetics and a beautiful soundtrack bringing the modern feel. *Tunic* will surprise a lot of people when it arrives, as this adventure could prove too good to pass up.





"A TYPICAL HERO IS USUALLY SOME SORT OF ELITE OR SOMEONE WITH A MILITARY BACKGROUND. SAM IS NOT. HE IS A WORKING MAN OF SORTS – A HANDS-ON PROFESSIONAL"
HIDEO KOJIMA, DIRECTOR



SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT • KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS • TBC 2019

DEATH STRANDING

THE NEXT STEP IN A NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY

44

WELL, WHERE DO WE BEGIN? *Death Stranding* is likely to remain an enigma until its release, and even then Hideo Kojima's latest might take a bit of time to truly figure out. The man himself is promising the game will have an impact on genre conventions just as the original *Metal Gear* did, itself classed as an action game on release because the stealth, or 'tactical espionage action', genre hadn't even been invented at that point. A huge claim, sure, but one we're willing to humour for the ex-KojiPro, now KojiPro man – if anyone can do it, Kojima can, right?

We do know a bit more about *Death Stranding* now, even if the majority of the game is still shrouded in mystery. You will control Sam Bridges – played by Norman Reedus – as he makes his way across a post-apocalyptic world on a journey to 'reunite the shattered world'. From what we've seen of the game so far, that looks like it means a lot of courier work – like an end-of-the-world UPS man, if you will – across desolate landscapes, pushing Bridges up, across and over any obstacle in his way on a long journey to whatever the finish might be.

On this journey, Sam may die – in fact, it's very likely Sam *will* die. But that's not the end of it – players are sent to a bizarre world, submerged in water and upside down, where they can eventually return to the world of the living and continue. In a Dark Souls-like touch, items lost when dying can be recovered, and vaguer elements have been touched on too – players can roam outside of Bridges' body, for example, and some (maybe all) of the rain we've seen in *Death Stranding*'s trailers, known as 'Timefall', is able to age anything it comes into contact with. There's a persistence to the world too, with KojiPro creating a world that is impacted by the player and what goes on around them – explosions, say, might cause scarring to the terrain that remains, permanently. It's a collection of intriguing elements, but we really need to see how the systems all play off each other to get a better idea of how well it's going to work.

Joining Reedus, Guillermo del Toro and Mads Mikkelsen on Kojima's list of 'folk he wanted to work with and now can', – del Toro with an unknown role, Mikkelsen *Death Stranding*'s antagonist – are both Léa Seydoux and Lindsay Wagner. Seydoux previously had roles in the likes of *Inglorious Basterds* and *Robin Hood*, while Wagner's credits go further back into the Seventies – fans of *The Bionic Woman* will remember her as said augmented female, and Kojima lists her as one of his favourite actors of all time. Could Wagner's youthful appearance in *Death Stranding* be impacted by the aforementioned Timefall, thus allowing her to appear as she does today? An *older woman*, in a *videogame*?! Madness. But it would make sense, in so much as anything in this game currently does.

Death Stranding will be a single-player game with online elements, according to Kojima, and his general ethos surrounding the title is to offer 'the stick' – guns, explosives, your usual game violence – alongside 'the rope' – a tool used to bind, to bring together, to keep us close. Kojima's games have always extolled an anti-war, anti-violence message, and while it's true they did at the same time revel in violence and gore, the potential is certainly there for a KojiPro game – unshackled from Konami, under the guidance of the seemingly more amenable Sony – to pursue this train of thought more deeply.

So what will *Death Stranding* be? Beautiful, haunting, melancholy, abstruse, atypical, pandering, self-indulgent and impactful. That's what we can infer for the moment, going on the work of Kojima to date. And in terms of the gameplay that we've witnessed, aside from a UPS delivery simulator with time-shifting rain, it could well be anything. And that, friends, is a very exciting prospect.



ROCKSTAR • IN-HOUSE • 26 OCTOBER

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

EVERYTHING HAS A PRICE

45

WHAT CONSTITUTES A COMPLETE GAME EXPERIENCE? We ask because there's been some concern over *Red Dead Redemption II* and its reveal of several special-edition packages, two of which come with additional story mode content: Bank Robbery Mission and Gang Hangout. When it comes to Rockstar games, we're pretty ravenous. We want to see and experience every facet of its game worlds because they are often so rich and entertaining, so if the idea of missing out on two story missions because you didn't want to pay an additional £20 for them concerns you, we sympathise.

Rockstar has since clarified on Twitter that the content in question "are side activities created specifically for that edition and are not part of the main story." So they are not crucial parts of the plot that you'll be missing out on, but by their description as a gang hideout assault and bank robbery, we can't help but feel we'll be missing out on some classic Red Dead action unless we plump for the Special or Ultimate Editions of the game. We would hope that in time these missions will be made available to all, but for the moment it looks like they'll be locked behind a paywall. Disappointing, but at least there will be plenty of other things to do in the game.



EA • DICE • 19 OCT 2018

BATTLEFIELD V

ROYALE, NO ADDED CHEESE

46

It was telling of the mood of the gaming world right now that the confirmation that *Battlefield V* would feature no loot boxes or season pass got just as big a reaction from the assembled EA Play crowd as the reveal of a post-launch royale mode. DICE isn't talking too much about its interpretation of the popular genre, but promises the destructibility and vehicles you would expect from this series.



VERSUS EVIL • STOIC STUDIO • 24 JULY 2018

THE BANNER SAGA 3

LAST FLAG FLYING

47

As you read this you may well have the concluding chapter of The Banner Saga trilogy in your hands, as the game managed to beat its expected release date. As with previous chapters, it features some of the best tactical RPG combat you could ever wish to experience, stunning animations and a rich story. What will these ex-BioWare developers move onto next? We don't yet know, but it's going to be worth keeping an eye out for.



SONY • PIXELOPUS • TBC 2018

CONCRETE GENIE

A WORLD WORTH SAVING

48

Pixelopus' painting platformer remains one of the most visually impressive and arresting things coming to PS4, which is saying something, and it's been interesting to see more of how the mechanics are going to work. The default appears to be using the motion control of the Dualshock 4 for controlling your brush; hopefully that's optional.. We're a little concerned that the bullies that chase your character Ash around may become annoying, but hopefully some balance will be found.

UBISOFT • UBISOFT QUEBEC • 5 OCT 2018

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

CREED GOES FULL RPG


Facing off against the enemy feels fluid and precise as we take down our attacker.

49

***ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY'S* ANNOUNCEMENT CAME WITH MANY SURPRISES.** Many expected the franchise to take a year off again, so a new release in 2018 caught us a little off guard, even if it was leaked well before its first showing at E3. The ability to play the game as a either Alexios or Kassandra was a welcome surprise, however, with the latter apparently being considered the canon lead of the game. But that's just the beginning of the new ideas leading to a fantastic new Assassin's Creed, if our first demo experience is any indication.

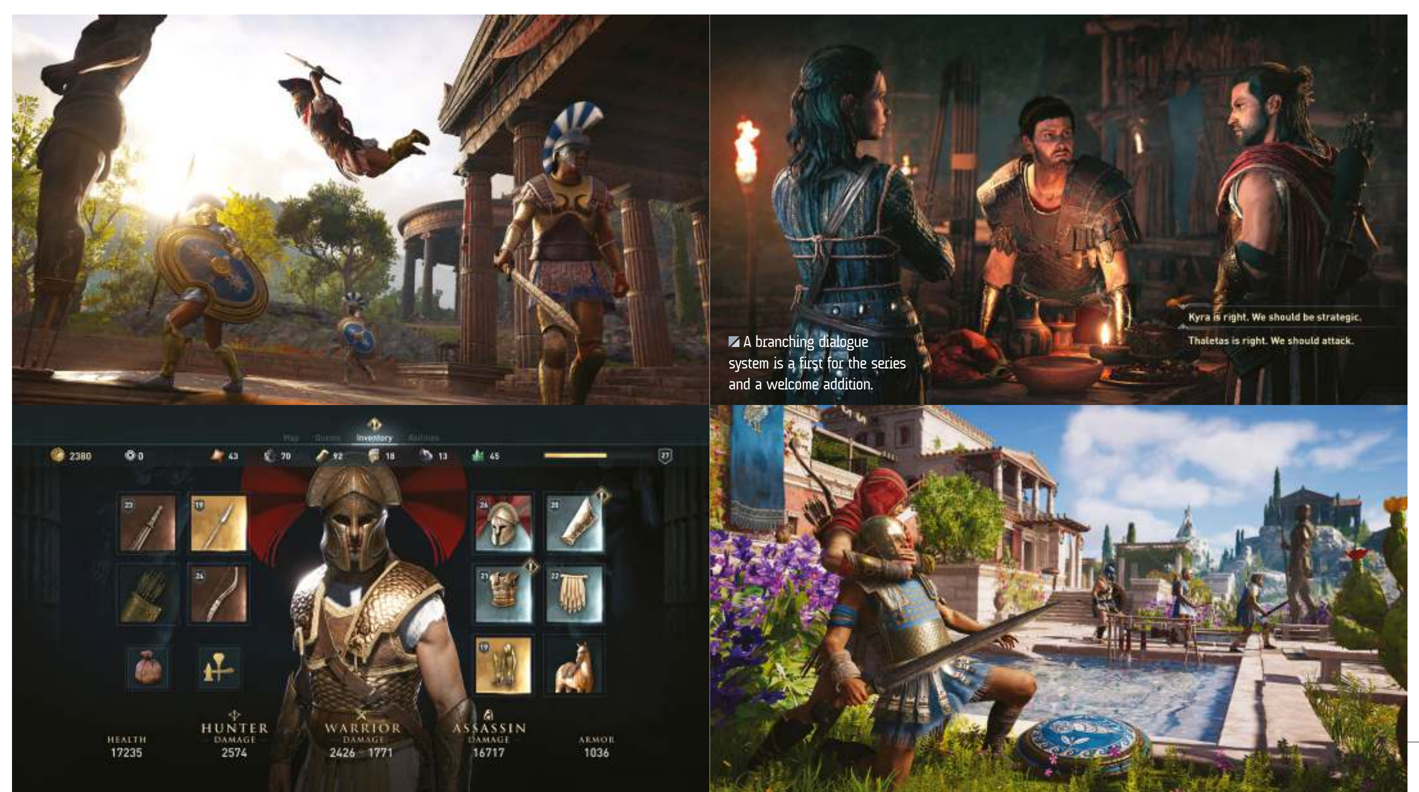
We're dropped in Mykonos City, one small section of a map made entirely of Grecian isles. As we explore the city comes to life in front of us, citizens walking freely and interacting with one another while merchants call out to potential customers. It's breathtaking, like we've been transported back in time, and it shows how much detail Ubisoft Quebec has included. Of course a living city comes with some travails, and suddenly we're approached by a mercenary hired to kill us.

This is our introduction to *Odyssey*'s combat, which brings some impressive changes. We can switch between melee weapons and a bow-and-arrow at will. Each weapon features four customisable powers, which are unlocked via an ability tree that brings a dash of role-playing to the game. Facing off against the enemy feels fluid and precise as we take down our attacker with ease. If you step to the assassin, you'd best not miss.

After a few cutscenes (including a franchise-first dialogue system) we're introduced to Conquest, one of *Odyssey*'s most important set pieces. Hundreds of soldiers fill the beach and our screen, duking it out as we charge in and take down enemies at will. A meter slowly shrinks as each side takes losses, and when the meter reaches a certain point the leader of the enemy forces finally joins the fray. Conquest's massive fracas was a ton of fun to fight through, and we hope there are a lot of them sprinkled throughout.

> "ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY IS MORE THAN JUST AN ADVENTURE, IT TRULY IS A ROLE-PLAYING JOURNEY."
> JONATHAN DUMONT, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, UBISOFT QUEBEC

Assassin's Creed Odyssey is an astonishing take on ancient Greece, the gigantic island-based open world filled with things to do. Both heroes are perfect leads, each one bringing a unique personality to the game. Brand-new Conquests bring the scale of the Spartan wars to life, dropping us into a massive battle and letting us fight how we want. Even though it's coming sooner than expected, we're confident *Odyssey* will be worthy of the Assassin's Creed name, building on all the best areas of the franchise and innovating everywhere else.



A branching dialogue system is a first for the series and a welcome addition.

MICROSOFT STUDIOS · THE COALITION · TBC 2019

GEARS OF WAR 5

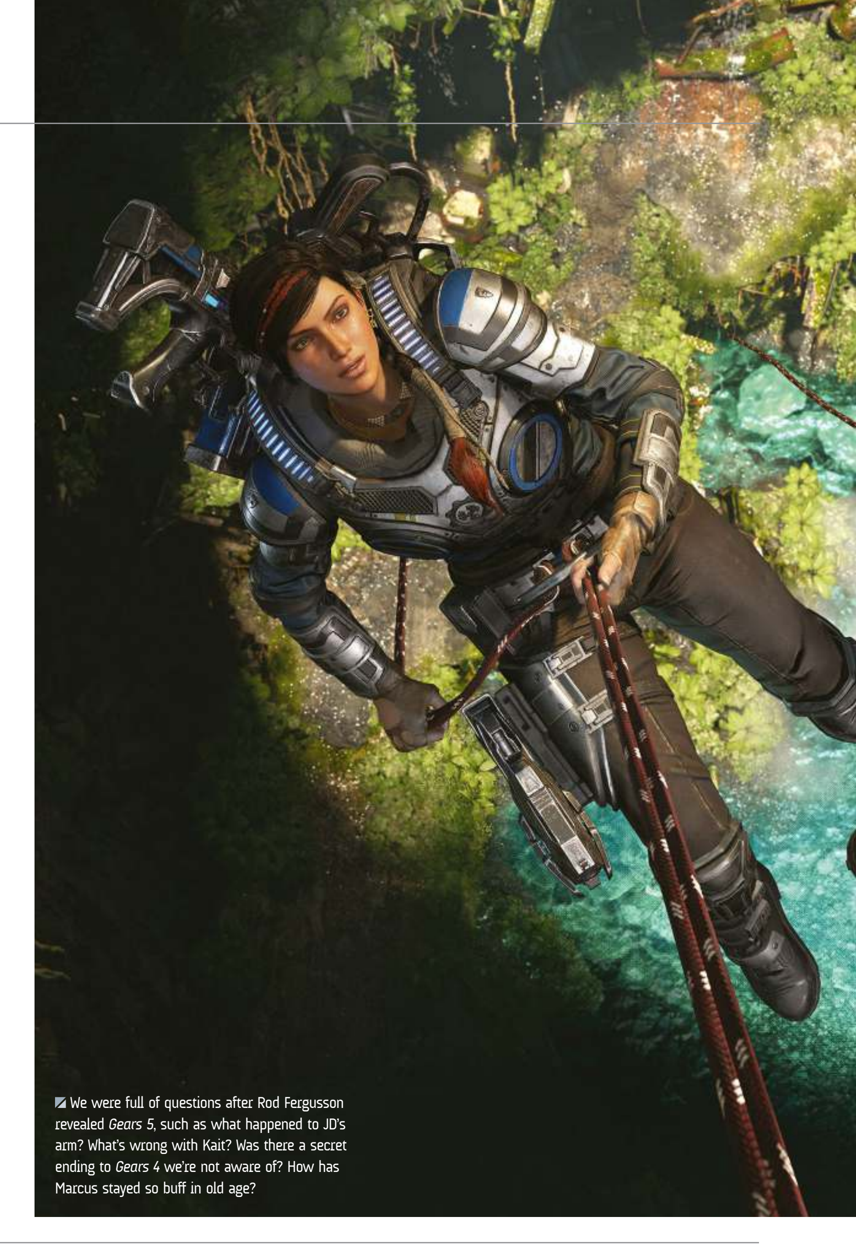
WHY DIDN'T THEY CALL IT 'GEAR5'?

50 **IT WASN'T SURPRISING TO SEE THE LATEST GEARS GAME** - stuffed with the usual big men with big necks, big guns, and big action – at Xbox's E3 conference. What was unusual was the move to pull series protags the Phoenix family from the limelight to make way for Kait Diaz to lead this fifth instalment.

Don't panic; Marcus and co are still very much there, so it's not a *complete* reworking of the iconic franchise. But *Gears 5* will pick up where *Gears of War 4* left off, continuing Kait's story as she journeys across "the biggest, most beautiful Gears world ever created" to follow her heart and explore the source of her bad dreams, which appear to be a portend of horrors to come.

We're expecting this instalment to tie a lot of the Gears lore together as verious hints were dropped in the last game connecting Kait to the Locust Queen (who was human, in case you don't recall) and given the Swarm's connection to the once-thought dead Locusts that could mean any number of things.

As we've come to expect from the Gears franchise, the latest instalment will feature a story mode that can also be played in online and couch co-op, 4K Ultra HD resolution, and 60 fps. Expect another gorgeously gory romp.



We were full of questions after Rod Fergusson revealed *Gears 5*, such as what happened to JD's arm? What's wrong with Kait? Was there a secret ending to *Gears 4* we're not aware of? How has Marcus stayed so buff in old age?



UNTITLED PUBLISHER · METKIS · TBC 2019

MORNING STAR

YOU SOW AND SOW

51 There's a lot of farming sims out there at the minute, but to be honest we've not seen any that offer quite the same premise as Metkis' *Morning Star*. Through a first-person perspective you'll get to sow your seeds and tend to your soil, only in this "post-cyberpunk" world, your seeds are software, and computers are your soil. Intrigued? Yeah, so are we!



THE POKÉMON COMPANY/NINTENDO · GAME FREAK · 16 NOV

POKÉMON LET'S GO

BRAVE MEW WORLD

52 *Pokémon Let's Go Pikachu* and *Let's Go Eevee* were just two of a whole heap of Pokémon-flavoured goodies announced this year. Releasing on the Nintendo Switch, the *Let's Go* games - inspired by *Pokémon Yellow* - will be newbie-friendly, particularly for those of you who've spent time with *Pokémon Go*. A Poke Ball Plus controller will be available (separately, of course), too.



AUTOMATON · IN-HOUSE · TBC 2018

MAVERICKS

PROVE IT

53 If you were playing a drinking game during E3 and taking a shot every time someone mentioned battle royale, we hope you've recovered now. *Mavericks: Proving Grounds* is the latest title elbowing for room in the market, only this one promises a player-driven narrative, a "bustling" social hub, dynamic weather, lighting and time-of-day changes... oh, and a 400-player fight to the death, too.



REBELLION • IN-HOUSE • 28 AUG 2018

STRANGE BRIGADE

SWEETS FROM A STRANGER

54

We spend a lot of time looking for satisfying co-op shooters, and we hope we've found one in *Strange Brigade*. Stuffed with affectionate homages to 1940s pop culture and topped off with wonderfully over-the-top narration, Rebellion's latest adventure is penned by *2000 AD*'s Gordon Rennie and will offer a single-player campaign that can also be played as four-player co-op.



EA • IN-HOUSE • 28 SEP 2018

FIFA 19

DON'T LOOK BACARY SAGNA

55

It was inevitable that PES' loss would be FIFA's gain. Once Konami announced its football franchise had parted ways with the Champions League, it was only a matter of time before EA leapt in to take its place. Expect FIFA's inaugural treatment of Europe's hottest footie competition to pop up in all the usual places, including Tournaments, Career, Story Mode, and Ultimate Team.



RAW FURY • SHEDWORKS • TBC 2019

SABLE

STRONG AND SABLE

56

At first glance, it's not really clear what Sable is. Described by developer Shedworks (so named because they do, quite literally, work from inside a shed) as a "coming-of-age tale of discovery through exploration", the game features striking artwork but doesn't give away much else other than a promise to be a "deeply personal journey". We can't help but be intrigued.

TEAM 17 · GHOST TOWN GAMES · 7 AUG 2018

OVERCOOKED 2

KNIVES AT THE READY

57

"CHOP THOSE TOMATOES FASTER!" "Get me more burgers!" "Why aren't the plates washed!?" If *Overcooked* was anything, it was the most beautiful and addictive stress-inducer we've ever played. *Overcooked 2* is bringing us more co-op cooking this August, this time with more elaborate level design, online multiplayer and the option to throw food at each other.

Other than the welcome addition of online multiplayer, the biggest change is kitchens that change dramatically as levels play out. For example, one test of you as a chef begins in a kitchen set on a giant platform suspended from a hot air balloon. When you're close to the ground you're thrown from the balloon and into a sushi kitchen, changing both the required recipes and layout of the kitchen.

To help with the added difficulty and the need to stay nimble of mind you have the option of throwing ingredients between each other. This cuts down on the time required to get the lettuce in the bun or the burger in the pan, giving you more freedom to define specific areas of the kitchen that each player controls.

As in the first game, though, some kitchens feature holes in the floor or are otherwise positioned in locations that make throwing anything risky business. Chucking a tomato to a friend isn't going to help anyone if it ends up off the side of the hot air balloon and lost in the clouds.







ACTIVISION · TREYARCH · 12 OCT 2018

BLACK OPS 4

A BRAVE NEW WORLD

58

With a battle royale mode but no campaign, *Black Ops 4* looks set to break many of the rules that have defined the Call Of Duty series for over 15 years. A real effort is being made to deliver elements that encourage players to work as a team rather than as lone wolves, which should result in this being the most socially-focused entry in the franchise's history.



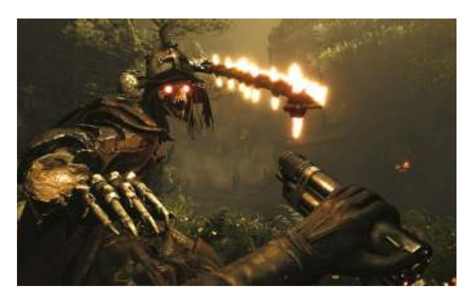
KOEI TECMO · TEAM NINJA · TBC 2019

NIOH 2

DEATH RETURNS, WITH CUSTOMISATION!

59

Evolution over revolution is the goal for *Nioh 2*, the action-RPG set on improving what made the original so enticing. You can bet that the difficult level is going to remain high and that death will be an ever-present feature on your journey. Character customisation is in this time around, however, which throws into question whether protagonist William will return.



THE ASTRONAUTS · IN-HOUSE · TBC 2019

WITCHFIRE

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY...

60

From the team that brought us indie hit *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter*, *Witchfire* is a first-person shooter set in a hellishly dark world patrolled by monsters and undead that are seemingly set on destroying you. Given the pedigree of its creators, though, our fingers are crossed for an experience that brings both narrative and action in equal measure.



SMALL TEAMS, BIG IDEAS

THE DEVELOPERS WHO ARE PUNCHING ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT



AVALANCHE STUDIOS • TBC 2019

GENERATION ZERO

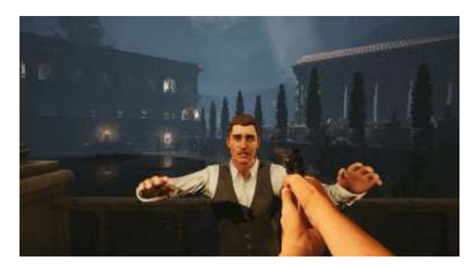
61 If you had told us that this was a prequel to *Horizon Zero Dawn* we might have believed you, but this is actually a brand new independent IP from Just Cause developer Avalanche set in a reimagined Eighties Sweden. Robots have arisen and you must survive and take them out in an open-world sandbox with up to three other players. Focused co-op shooter action essentially.



COFFEE STAIN • TBC 2019

SATISFACTORY

62 From the team that brought us *Goat Simulator* we have a very different kind of sandbox experience, this time sending us off to unexplored alien world with the mission of setting up an ever-expanding factory to produce… something. FICSIT Inc. isn't being forthcoming. We sense ulterior motives, but the core game looks very promising to us.



MODERN STORYTELLER • TBC 2019

THE FORGOTTEN CITY

63 Originally a *Skyrim* mod and winner of many awards, *The Forgotten City* is becoming a fully-fledged game and its dark story that takes you back and forth between its citizens attempting to save their lives is a fascinating one. If just one person commits a sin, everyone dies and you have to travel through time to try and stop that from happening. One to keep on your radar.



RADIATION BLUE • TEAM17 • 4 SEP 2018

GENESIS ALPHA ONE

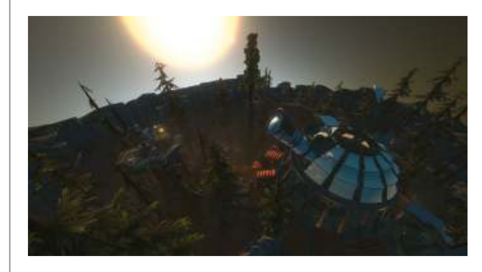
64 Promising a mix of space exploration, base-building and rogue-like gameplay, *Genesis Alpha One* is bringing together some curious concepts. You command a customisable vessel seeking a new home for your crew. As you explore worlds and gather resources you can also collect alien specimens and experiment with DNA.



DEFINE HUMAN STUDIOS • TBC 2018

ISLANDS OF NYNE

67 Already available in Early Access on Steam, *Islands Of Nyne* is another battle royale game, although this one feels more explicitly inspired by *The Hunger Games*. Set in a dome with sci-fi styling, *Islands Of Nyne* is first-person and promises a skill-based experience. Thanks to alien tech the battlefield is strewn with strange traps and surprises to keep things interesting.



MOBIUS DIGITAL • ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE • TBC 2018

OUTER WILDS

66 This one feels like a direct reaction to *No Man's Sky*, promising a hand-crafted solar system of planets with a mystery and strange time loop mechanics playing into the experience. The worlds themselves look bizarre, some completely hollowed out and others experiencing weather that sucks entire land-masses out of the ocean.



TEAMKILL STUDIOS • Q4 2018

LORN

65 Pitched as a medieval survival horror experience, if you think of it as first-person *Dark Souls* by way of *Outlast* then you wouldn't be too far off what *Lorn* is all about. It's dark, murky and creepy. Making your way through dimly torch-lit corridors with only a club to defend yourself against zombies sounds challenging enough, but it also looks like there's a dragon.

YOU'RE ALLOWED TO BE POLITICAL

WHY IT'S TIME FOR DEVELOPERS TO STOP DODGING THE AGENDA QUESTION

WE LIVE IN A POLITICALLY CHARGED AGE. This isn't a particularly new phenomenon by our estimation, as it appears to have been building for a number of years, but many developers remain behind the curve. We're just a little more socially, economically and philosophically clued-in as gamers than we used to be and frankly, we deserve a better answer to queries about political statements or messages being inherent in game concepts than 'we're not making a political statement'.

This came to the forefront of our mind most recently with the full reveal of *The Division 2*. The action has been moved from the streets of Manhattan to those of Washington DC as the infection that decimated New York has apparently spread to the capital and brought down the government. Once again, the sleeper agents of The Division have been activated to attempt to restore law and order on the streets and bring down factions who are attempting to seize control.

So far, so classic action premise set-up. You're the good guys, they're the bad guys, weapons free and fire away. Of course with the New York game and its looters and street gangs, having a sleeper cell of government agents bringing justice to the streets with high-end tech and bullet-proof vests did feel a little pointed. Such armaments on the streets feels like stark imagery to anyone concerned about the use of force by law enforcement against civilian populations. In a crisis situation where the boundaries are a little more blurred and the stakes seemingly very high, we might be able to set such issues aside, but they exist. The point was perhaps more pronounced in 2015's *Battlefield Hardline* with the militarisation of the police being a hot topic in the news around the same time.

But while chaos in New York is one thing, having *The Division 2* in Washington DC with so much attention being paid globally to activity in that region in recent years feels far more pointed. To say 'we're not making a political statement' just doesn't ring true. We're not expecting anyone from Ubisoft to come out and say *The Division 2* is a parable or an allegory for one policy or another, but something more robust than dismissal seems appropriate. We've thought a lot about what a reasonable response would be and we've settled on the following: 'While we're not attempting to make any particular political point with this game, we have clearly chosen a politically charged and resonant location for our game and the issues around clandestine government agencies has always been at the heart of Tom Clancy's works. As such, we'll leave it to players to make up their minds about the issues this game raises'.

Does that seem reasonable? Does that seem honest about intentions, but even-handed enough not to alienate anyone based on their political beliefs? Burying your head in the sand isn't a way to deflect these kinds of questions, but acknowledging that they exist while also reaffirming your game as a piece of entertainment, not a polemic, is also very important.

> "BURYING YOUR HEAD IN THE SAND ISN'T A WAY TO DEFLECT THESE KINDS OF QUESTIONS"

To our minds, games can be political without taking a side per se. Is Grand Theft Auto taking a side when it lampoons American culture and politics? Was *BioShock* taking a side when it showed the excesses of a free-market society? We would suggest no, but while not being heavy-handed in their approach, they still went after these topics as being worthy and achievable themes for their stories to tackle. Being political doesn't mean being partisan necessarily. Being political doesn't mean taking a stand. You can just raise the questions and let us give our answers, and that's alright.

We understand that many players dislike the very concept of politics in their games, and we can sympathise with that position. Games are entertainment, they might point out, and should be fun. We play games to escape the world around us, not to delve even deeper into it. That's not unreasonable, but having a political element or edge doesn't mean that it has to dominate the experience or diminish the fun factor. The game itself doesn't necessarily have to acknowledge the broader context at all, just so long as the developer isn't completely oblivious to it.

We don't think that Massive Entertainment is oblivious to the impact of seeing a downed Air Force One on The Mall. We don't think it opened its trailer with a quote from Abraham Lincoln about America's downfall coming from within rather than outside without considering the resonance that might have. To claim otherwise just seems disingenuous. Much as David Cage recently claiming that *Detroit: Become Human* was just about androids when it's set in a former industrial powerhouse of America and has you fighting for the rights of a slave class didn't really ring true. There's a better answer to the question than we're often being given.









GAMES ABOUT IDEAS

GAMES THAT HAVE PUT POLITICAL QUESTIONS AT THE HEART OF THE EXPERIENCE



PAPERS, PLEASE

As a border-control officer you are the first line of defence against subversive forces or even terrorists entering the country, but you could also abuse your power to your own ends. *Papers, Please* swims in the murky waters of bureaucratic power very nicely.



BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

A game about anthropomorphised animals and alien invasion? Certainly, but *Beyond Good & Evil* is also about freedom of speech and expression as Jade attempts to get evidence of corruption and brutality out to the rest of the world.



ORWELL

Similar to *Papers, Please*, but set in a more modern world and with modern technology, you head up a surveillance site looking for possible security threats on behalf of an authoritarian regime. To what degree will you be willing to execute its dictates?



METAL GEAR SOLID

A great example of a game that on the surface is a pretty neutral action experience, but which happily weaves in conversations about nuclear arms, the role of military forces and the general state of geo-politics without taking anything away from the experience.



FALLOUT 4

While the political elements of Bethesda's RPG may be a little fudged in places, the general concepts of civil rights and military influence remain strong, as well as the question of what would be best for humanity moving forward. *Fallout 4* forces you to make a choice.



We can tell you from the in-game demo that we witnessed, that CD Projekt Red's trailer isn't far off the real look of the game. This is one mightily impressive new world to explore.

CD PROJEKT RED • IN-HOUSE • TBC 2019

CYBERPUNK 2077

CD PROJEKT RED FINALLY PULLS BACK THE CURTAIN

68

THE 2018 XBOX E3 MEDIA BRIEFING WAS COMING TO AN END. PHIL SPENCER TOOK THE STAGE FOR A FINAL TIME TO SEE EVERYONE OFF AND RECAP WHAT HAD JUST TRANSPIRED. Suddenly the screens around him flashed and distorted, the normal green hue of an Xbox showcase replaced with a deep and jarring red. Hacker? Prank? Neither. This was *Cyberpunk 2077* making its presence felt. Now that we've bore witness to a behind-closed-doors demo of the game, we understand the need for a dramatic emergence. CD Projekt Red had delivered to us a glimpse at the future of video games.

Cyberpunk 2077 places us into the role of V, a mercenary routinely called upon to take on the dirtiest jobs in the city. This bleak alternate America is fertile ground for a hired gun like V, as street gangs run wild in the underground and ultra-powerful megacorporations do the same out in the open. Night City is a gigantic urban environment populated with all sorts of human (and augmented non-human) life, serving as a perfect playground for V's line of work.

Before we dig in let us stress something major to the CDPR fans out there: delete any preconceived notions you have in your head. *Cyberpunk 2077* at first glance looks nothing like a typical CDPR game. The entire game is played in first person. We're shooting guns and throwing grenades instead of drawing swords and using magic. The epic fantasy landscapes are replaced with urban grit. As we dig deeper into the demo however, all of the RPG hallmarks we'd expect, from dialogue trees to vast customisation options, remain intact.

Take customisation for example: the main protagonist is completely created by you at game start. Gender, features, apparel and even V's backstory is completely dictated by you. As the game progresses V will gain new outfits and weapons, allowing you to insert your personal style onto your character. What's more, style plays a big role in the world of *Cyberpunk*, so whatever outfits you favour will offer your character in-game perks as well. *Cyberpunk* is essentially rewarding you for incorporating your own tastes onto V, which is unprecedented.

V's first mission after leaving her digs (the demo created V to be a woman in this instance) is to locate a missing person feared to have been kidnapped by Scavengers, a violent and merciless group who target random citizens and harvest their cyber enhancements. V and her partner Jackie enter the apartment, and after some brief downtime we run into the Scavengers and the fighting begins. V deftly jumps behind cover and pops out to take a few shots, killing Scavengers as she goes. When things get hairy she takes a Reflex Booster power-up, which slows down time and allows her to take out the rest of the group. Eventually we find our quarry naked and laying in a tub of ice water, the implant she needed to call for help having of course been removed. We place a call for an 'ambulance' – more like a military transport – and the hostage is rescued.

There's a definite theme of 'haves versus have-nots' at play here, a clear separation of classes fuelled by an ultra-capitalist fervour. The cyber modifications that gave rise to the megacorporation overlords of this city leave their indelible mark on it, as poverty and woe seem to surround V during the demo. The rescue of the hostage



The gameplay we've seen so far is reminiscent of so many firts-person RPG offerings in recent years, but with even more depth and variety. There are clearly comparisons to be made with recent Deus Ex games, but this already looks more diverse.

MEET THE CHARACTERS

The main character of the story, V is a mercenary on the rise that resides in the Heywood section of Night City. V is a specialist in doing the dirty jobs no one else wants to touch or, more importantly, be connected with.



JACKIE WELLES

V's partner in merc work, an imposing brute of a man who's efficient in taking down as many enemies as needed. He's a proud Latino who often mixes in some Spanish when he speaks, though mostly to insult enemies before he kills them.



DEXTER DESHAWN

Seated on the left of the picture, Dexter DeShawn is a big player in the seedier dealings of Night City. He's so impressed with V's work that he personally invites V into his limousine and offers V a job. According to Jackie, he's a good friend to have.



THE RIPPERDOC

Scattered throughout Night City are what locals call "ripperdocs," medical professionals who specialize in switching out modifications. We anticipate a lot of visits to our local ripperdoc as we progress further into the story and earn more cash.



MEREDITH STOUT

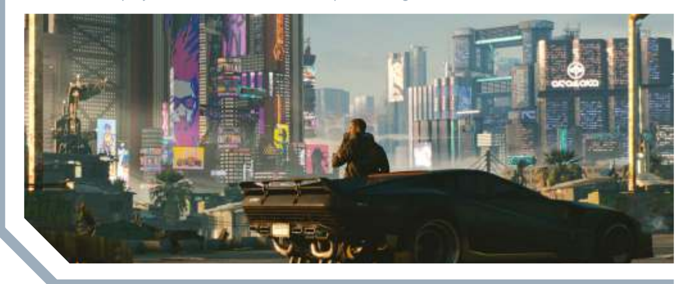
Meredith Stout is a special ops agent working for Militech, one of the leading megacorporations in the city. As ruthless as she is cunning, she will not hesitate to sacrifice anyone on her rise to the top. V would be wise to keep her at arms' length.

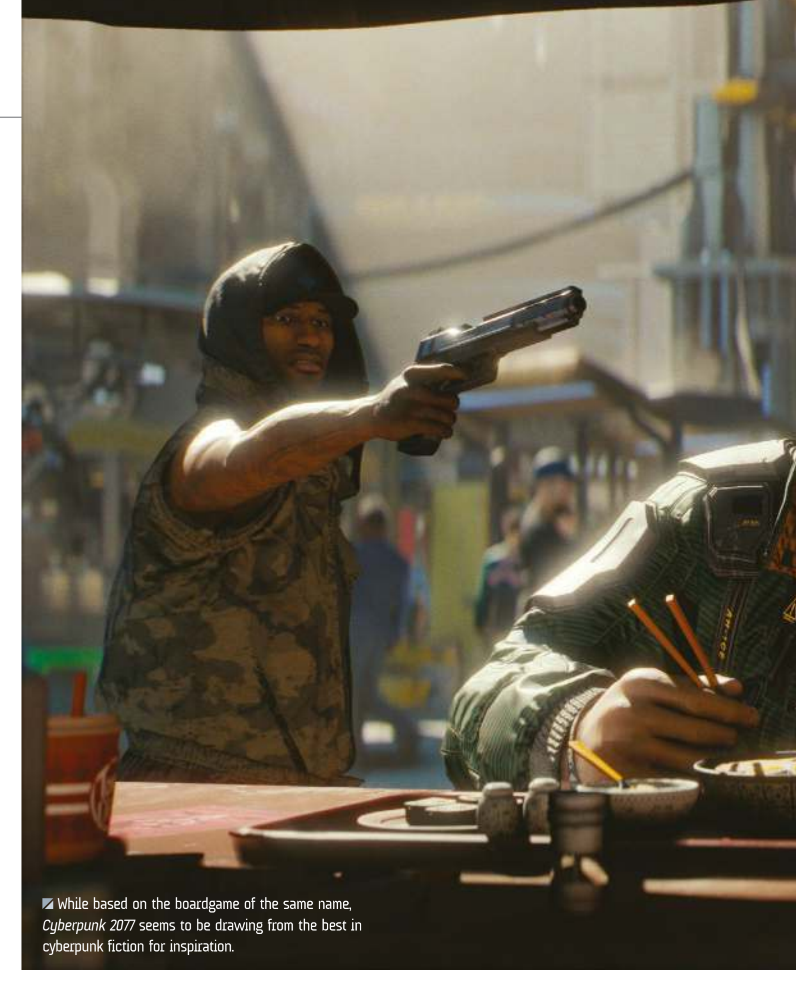
NIGHT CITY LIFE

HOW BIG IS THIS PLACE?

Night City is just as much a character in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* as any of the people on screen, and CD Projekt Red is promising a massive open world for us to explore. How big are we talking? According to the team the city is split into six different districts, not unlike the different regions of *The Witcher 3*, that players can travel through freely and without loading screens so there's no break in the action.

City Center is the largest region, dominated with corporate aesthetics and luxury. Next is Westbrook, home to the elite corporate overlords and billed as the most exclusive part of town. The other four districts are not as affluent, particularly Santa Domingo's heavy industrial areas lined with giant factories and power plants. Pacifica is considered the most dangerous part of the city thanks to rampant crime activity. Finally there's the residential areas, Heywood bearing strong Latino themes and Watson a primarily Asian district. These are the six regions where V's adventure will play out, each with its own unique offerings.





While based on the boardgame of the same name, *Cyberpunk 2077* seems to be drawing from the best in cyberpunk fiction for inspiration.



You'll face some top-end tech in your missions, but you have some stunning abilities to call upon in a firefight when it seems you're outgunned.

in that brief mission is a perfect example: the woman was paying for the highest healthcare possible, so that hospital militia coming for her was completely covered. If she didn't have that insurance, would she have been left to die? Little details like that make us suspect struggles between the classes will play a part in the story of *Cyberpunk*, though we're not entirely sure how.

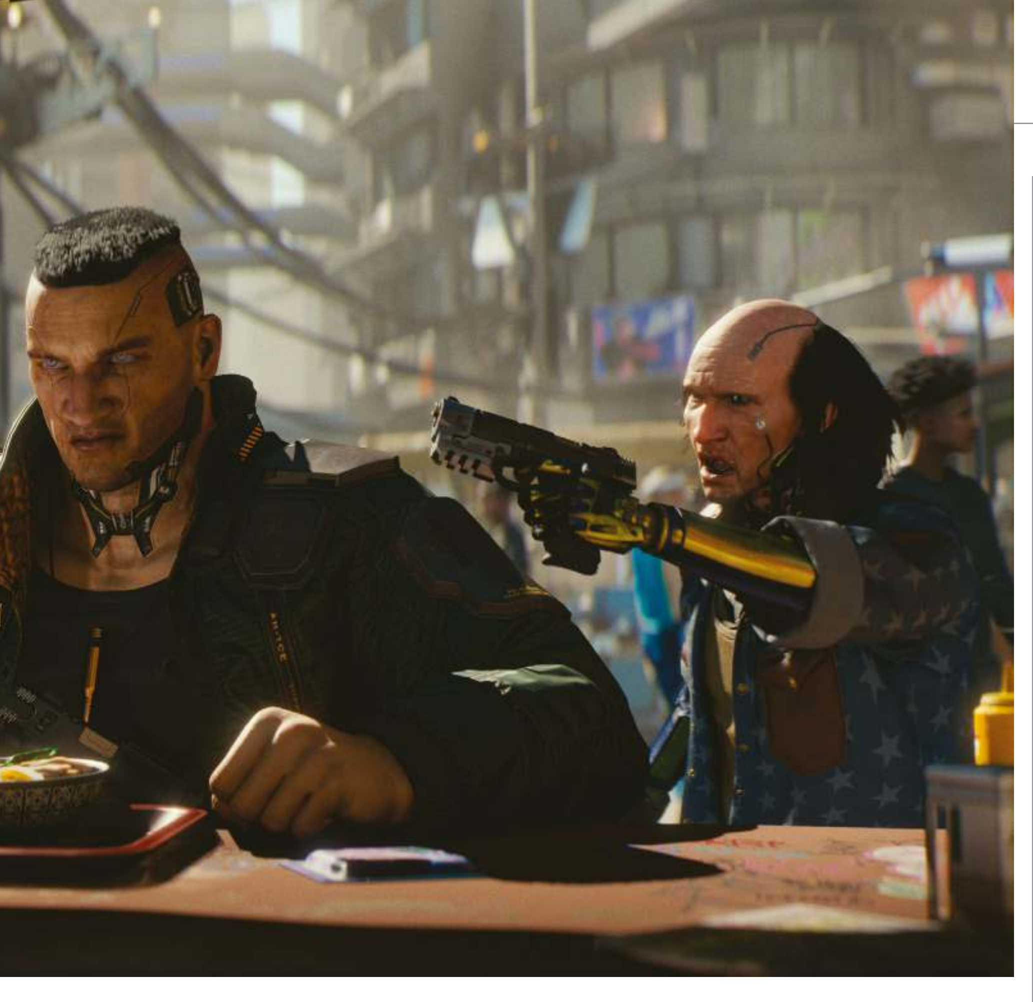
This mission also serves as our formal introduction to the backdrop of this sordid tale. Night City stretches as far as the eye can see, both in front and above V. Everything we see contains people to talk to, jobs to take on, and enemies to kill. It's a large, dense metropolis that she will need to explore every inch of in order to fully comprehend. Here's one small example: some of Night City's denizens may speak a different language than English, and the only way to understand them is to purchase a translation upgrade for that language. That's the level of detail CD Projekt Red is going for here, so exploration will be key.

Despite her line of work putting her in the middle of the apparent class warfare, V is just as much a citizen of this rough city as any NPC, and the demo reminds us of this between missions via a glimpse at her apartment. This is a central location that can be visited at any time where V can apply new customisations, buy and equip new gear and even interact with love interests. It can be visited at any time outside of a mission, and while there will be merchants outside of V's safe haven it's cool to always have a place to strategise for the next job, as we see when the second part of the demo begins.

Three days after the rescue mission V wakes up and watches a stranger scurry out of the apartment, hinting that romantic opportunities will come from all sorts of places in Night City. Jackie calls and tells V of an opportunity to meet a major player in Night City, Dexter DeShawn, who's got a job for the duo to take care of. It seems Dexter is in need of a device belonging to one of the game's megacorporations, called Militech. The device is currently held by a gang of modification addicts called Maelstrom, which means V and Jackie will be jumping into a lion's den. Thankfully the two are incredibly proficient in combat, as we soon learn.

While the first mission showed off some brief pistol play, this new mission really dives into V's combat capabilities, both ranged and up close. The massive blades mounted in her arms make deadly melee weapons, and we watch as the merc gruesomely takes down an enemy with them. Her stealth kill







involves literally plugging into the guard, killing him and downloading his information for our own use. That is very clever use of the technological advancements of the world, yet another example of CDPR's attention to detail.

Gunplay proves just as important in this mission as well, as we're also shown a small sample of the "hundreds of weapons" CD Projekt Red plans for the full game. First V finds a shotgun that can shoot through cover via a special charged shot. She then picks up a 'smart rifle', a gun with bullets that seek enemies, changing trajectory mid-flight if fired in the wrong direction. Our favourite weapon was the pistol where shots could be deflected off of walls, giving V a quick counter to an enemy behind cover. V's abilities can be tailored for any type of player, and this demo did a terrific job of showing that off.

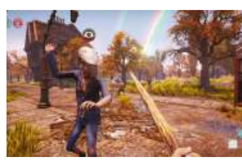
As the *Cyberpunk 2077* demo ended and we reflected on what we had just seen, we realised just how much CD Projekt Red packed into a short 50-minute window. We became familiar with the primary players in *Cyberpunk* and the city in which they work. We saw how personalised this adventure will be, giving us choices down to the most minute details. We fought through two missions, experiencing gunplay across a wide array of weapons. We met all sorts of people, derelicts and the elite, illegal harvesters and legitimate 'ripperdocs' (who we weren't even able to get to in this preview). CD Projekt Red brought us its idea of the future of video games, and after that demo we are all in on that vision.

Now we wait for the next batch of information… whenever that may be. 



WE HAPPY FEW

69 Compulsion's procedurally generated survival-and-escape game has developed a fair bit from its original reveal.



A much more involved story of the downfall of this society has now emerged and is being weaved into the experience. You must attempt to hide your intentions as you bring it all down.

SCUM

70 With a backstory involving supermax prisoners being left to fend for themselves on an island as part of a new TV



show, *Scum* has a little of everything influencing it from the open-world survival genre, but that's good because it's showing how it can learn from those mistakes to make something much better.

BABYLON'S FALL

71 PlatinumGames and Square Enix are teaming up again after the success of *Nier: Automata* with a brand-new title that neither is



saying too much about. What we can glean from our first look is that it will be in Platinum's action wheelhouse and feature some mix of high fantasy and sci-fi.

NOITA

72 Pixelart roguelikes are ten a penny, but such games having every pixel simulated so that you can actually



have massive destruction and fluid dynamics affect the game world is something unique, and that's what *Noita* is bringing to the table. The animation style and magic effects this brings are really eye-catching.

SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT • SUCKER PUNCH • TBC 2019



GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

FINDING THE BEAUTY IN BLOODSHED

73

***GHOST OF TSUSHIMA* EXPLORES THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN BEAUTY AND BLOODSHED.** This startling contrast is ever-present in the upcoming Sony exclusive. The beauty of its sprawling environments compelling you to stop at every opportunity, its breathtaking visual design as good a reason as any to take a second to pause for air. Although that serenity is easily shattered in this brutal portrayal of Feudal Japan, with your surroundings as likely to be stained with the blood of your enemies as it is your own in any given moment.

Ghost Of Tsushima tells the story of the island of Tsushima, of its native samurai and their attempts to repel an encroaching Mongol invasion before the land is engulfed entirely by the flames of war.

This is what happens when Sucker Punch is given the space to leave Infamous and the grunge aesthetic behind it, taking its expertise in open-world game design into a more vibrant and naturalistic setting. The results are impressive for all to see. *Tsushima* is stunning, an action-adventure game that pits you – Jin, one of the last remaining samurai – against an army of thousands, evolving your skills and proficiencies in an attempt to adapt to the shifting environment and face down an impossible threat.

Listening to Sucker Punch tell it, the game has been built around three core tenets: mud, blood and steel. All of this is clear to see once the demonstration begins. Beneath the billowing clouds of smoke that mask the horizon and the flitter of tall grass in the gentle winds is the thick, sickening mud. Tsushima's

> "HAVING EVERYTHING MOVE, IF IT CAN MOVE MAKE IT MOVE, WAS A VERY AMBITIOUS GOAL FOR US FROM THE VERY BEGINNING. AND WE'RE ACHIEVING IT! YOU WALK AROUND THE GAME WORLD AND YOU'LL BE LIKE OH MY GOD, EVERYTHING AROUND ME IS MOVING!"
> JASON CONNELL, ART DIRECTOR, SUCKER PUNCH

pristine environments trodden by the hordes of Mongol fighters patrolling the island, the grime and dirt splashing all over Jin as he dances between their sweeping blades. Your feet make an impression in the ground, though so too does the blood once it begins to spill by your steel.

There are a lot of unanswered questions about *Tsushima*, namely as to how its combat will scale between large groups of enemies and its intricate one-on-one duels. It doesn't look as haphazard as the sword-fighting presented in early Assassin's Creed games, nor does it seem as precise and considered as the combat seen in *For Honor* – only time will tell on this front.

With the game positioned for release in 2019, it's going to be (sadly) hands-off demonstrations for the time being. But we've seen enough of *Tsushima* to know that Sucker Punch is delivering something the likes of which we've never before seen in gaming. A beautiful and bloody portrayal of 13th-century Japan that feels as authentic as is it does cinematic, an adventure that we can't wait to lose ourselves in.

NINTENDO · INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS · TBC 2019

FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES

STRATEGY ON A GRANDEUR SCALE

74

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS WAS ALWAYS GOING TO GO BIG WITH SOMETHING LIKE THIS. It's already been 11 years since the release of *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn*, the last game in the long-running strategy series to release on a home console. After numerous excellent handheld editions in that time we've long wondered how the studio would look to scale up Fire Emblem for a new generation.

We wonder no longer. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* is coming to Switch in 2019, and we can say with absolutely certainty that you've never seen a Fire Emblem game quite like this. We don't just mean the darker tone or the more vibrant graphics either, the studio is giving us full-3D environments to explore, and it has taken steps to make the turn-based combat more dynamic and expressive. No longer do you command lonely heroes across the battlefield, instead each is now charged with leading a small contingent of troops that mirror their particular proficiency in battles. The focus is still on the named characters, of course, their death still to be a solemn moment, but the introduction of additional soldiers to the field adds a sense of scale that we've never really seen in Fire Emblem. *Three Houses* was scheduled to launch in 2018, though Intelligent Systems has pushed it to the next year. The extra time is paying off, because this game looks absolutely stunning.





BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • AVALANCHE STUDIOS, ID SOFTWARE • Q1 2019

RAGE 2

WE GO HANDS-ON WITH 2019'S WILDEST FPS

75

EVERYTHING ABOUT *RAGE 2* IS DELICIOUSLY OVER-THE-TOP; THE GORE, THE GUNS, THE GOONS, THE COMBAT, THE SOUND EFFECTS. Unapologetically bombastic, its tight, frantic gunplay *bleeds* id Software, making it feel fabulously familiar for anyone who's spent time with its recently rebooted Doom title. It would be easy to underestimate it – wave it off as just another post-apocalyptic shooter – but don't be too hasty; the more time you spend with *Rage 2*, the more sophisticated it feels.

Yes, the combat is outrageous and flamboyant, but it's clever, too, encouraging you to keep creeping forward, chaining your attacks, experimenting with your powers – that's right, you get superhuman powers in *Rage 2* – and loadouts. In an opening tutorial, a mocking voice reminds us that "mobility is key to survival". It's not wrong.

While the story picks up where *Rage* left off, knowledge of the prior game is not a prerequisite. You play as Walker, the "last ranger of the vinelands", a rare breed of protagonist that talks aloud to help players remember – or learn – the story's history.

Each combat sequence plays a little differently as you come to grips with your weapons and powers. At first there's a temptation to hang back, snipe strategically, but *Rage 2* isn't that kind of shooter. Which is just as well, really – it's *so* much more fun to go in all-guns-blazin'. We dodge and swerve with slick fluidity, able to flit across each section with smooth, silent speed. Overdrive – a special ability activated once you've filled a meter – tints everything a hot pink as you unleash carnage, rampaging through the waves of enemies. Tactical use of grenades, wingsticks – yes, we're delighted to report that they're back – and your powers – Dash, Shatter, Slam, with more promised – can be devastating, and the more creative your combat, the quicker it is to top up that Overdrive meter.

For a game rooted firmly in a post-apocalyptic setting, *Rage 2* is surprisingly colourful, and no, we're not just talking about that hot pink again. The world has moved on since we last took on The Authority, and gone are those brown, sandy, boring backdrops. Nature has woven its way through this world, the environments reclaimed by lush nature.

Unfortunately, we've yet to see how Avalanche's open-world mastery impacts on *Rage 2*'s sandbox exploration. There are some gorgeously distressed (and distress*ing*, depending on how many enemies are waiting for you) urban interiors for which id gives all credit to its partner, and though we've seen vehicles in demos, we've yet to experiment with them for ourselves.

Bethesda reckons putting two triple-A studios together will give some of us the sextuple-A post-*post*-apocalyptic shooter of our dreams. Guess we'll find out for sure in early 2019.

"WE HAD A TON OF CRAZY IDEAS WHEN WE STARTED PLANNING RAGE 2 AND WE NEEDED THE RIGHT STUDIO TO BRING OUR VISION TO LIFE. WE'VE ADMIRED THE OPEN-WORLD CHAOS IN ALL OF AVALANCHE STUDIO'S GAMES AND THEY HAVE DELIVERED BIG TIME"

TIM WILLITS, STUDIO DIRECTOR, ID SOFTWARE



SONY · INSOMNIAC GAMES · 7 SEPTEMBER 2018

SPIDER-MAN

ONE OF 2018'S MOST ANTICIPATED TITLES

76

How has it taken so long to get Insomniac on a Spider-Man game? It's clear that the studio has a fantastic grasp on the core aspects to the character; it just *feels* right. Whether he is swinging between skyscrapers across Insominiac's rendition of Marvel's New York – an open-world space that continues to impress in its scope, scale and attention to detail – or whether he is kicking the heck out of large groups of criminals. This is the first Spider-Man game to really *nail* the speed, agility and utility of the character, and every Spider-Man fan should be eagerly awaiting the arrival of this come September.



UBISOFT · REDLYNX · FEBRUARY 2019

TRIALS RISING

FAILING IS HALF THE FUN

77

We don't quite know if our fingers (and tempers) are ready for another Trials. Developer RedLynx doesn't care about our spiralling blood pressures though, announcing *Trials Rising*, and it's looking like it might just be the best entry to the series yet. While you can expect the usual balancing act of speed and precision, this time across a variety of tracks inspired by famous real-world locations, *Rising* will also introduce a new co-operative mode called Tandem Bike, which lets players split control of a bike across two separate gamepads. It looks ridiculous and infuriating, and we wouldn't have it any other way.

TECHLAND • IN-HOUSE • TBC 2019

DYING LIGHT 2

ADDING NARRATIVE CHOICE TO UNDEAD THWACKING

78

WITH OVER TWO YEARS OF WORK, 200+ PEOPLE WORKING ON IT AND ONE WELL-KNOWN GAMING WRITER BEHIND THE NARRATIVE, *DYING LIGHT 2* IS AIMING FOR GROWTH OVER THE ORIGINAL. The core concepts remain the same – a first-person parkour-'em-up where the exploration of a city in the daytime is exciting and the avoidance of horrific undead beasts at nighttime is terrifying.

But this time around there's more of everything – a city many times bigger than the whole of the original game and its add-ons put together, with a more 'tactical' approach to parkour and an increased moveset to suit our nimble player character, improved AI both for humans and the infected and – what Techland is most proud of – a narrative that changes with the player's (in)actions.

With Chris Avellone on board – designer and writer on many classic titles such as *Planescape: Torment*, *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Star Wars: KOTOR II* – the Techland team has been able to factor in storyline elements in a far deeper fashion than previously. Rather than a narrative A-to-B, *Dying Light 2* presents players with meaningful choices as the game progresses, and the decisions made throughout will have a direct impact on the game world, opportunities available, characters who make an appearance, even just the general look of things.

The example shown was one of a group of ne'er do wells controlling a region's water supply – fighting and climbing to the top of the tower to confront the leader of the gang, players can stop them from controlling the taps, or join with them. The results of the decision vary wildly, with the former leading to a safer region of the world with life-giving water available everywhere, but a general air of fascistic oppression by the controlling forces and violence against the nonbelievers. The latter decision, meanwhile, leads to a region of underdevelopment and drought, without the Peace Keepers' force moving in to take control, but with the player receiving a cut of the profits from the water racket.

With more decisions throughout the game, it's sure to be a unique experience for everyone who plays it – and *Dying Light 2*'s work on improving combat, stealth and navigation is sure to make it all into a far more refined version of the good but rough-around-the-edges original.

Dying Light 2 is being made with confidence by a team that successfully turned a cult hit into a game people were still playing years after its release. The additions and tweaks to the formula make sense and look to be being handled with due care and attention, and drafting in Avellone could turn out to be a genius move. This is one to keep a close eye on over the next year or so.

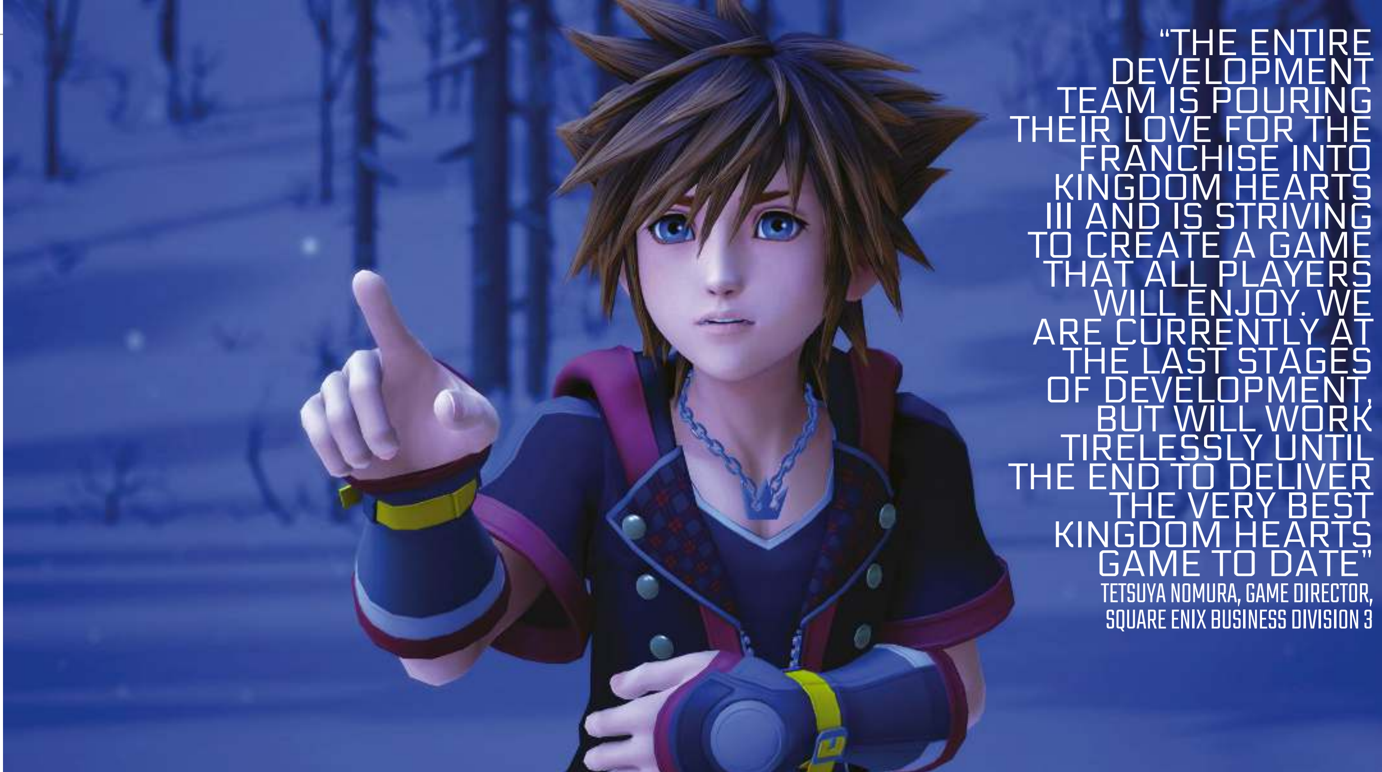


Parkour remains a core pillar of *Dying Light 2*, with speedy traversal around the city giving this game a unique feel when compared to other zombie action fair. And then of course the night falls and all hell breaks loose.

"WE WANTED TO SHOW A MODERN DARK AGES – A BRUTAL, PRIMAL, MERCILESS WORLD"
TYMON SMEKTALA, LEAD DESIGNER



Bringing significant elements of choice to the game's mission structure means that no two playthroughs of *Dying Light 2* need be the same. The balance of the city can be drastically altered, also resulting in different benefits to you over time.



"THE ENTIRE DEVELOPMENT TEAM IS POURING THEIR LOVE FOR THE FRANCHISE INTO KINGDOM HEARTS III AND IS STRIVING TO CREATE A GAME THAT ALL PLAYERS WILL ENJOY. WE ARE CURRENTLY AT THE LAST STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT, BUT WILL WORK TIRELESSLY UNTIL THE END TO DELIVER THE VERY BEST KINGDOM HEARTS GAME TO DATE"

TETSUYA NOMURA, GAME DIRECTOR, SQUARE ENIX BUSINESS DIVISION 3

SQUARE ENIX • SQUARE ENIX BUSINESS DIVISION 3 • 25 JANUARY 2019

KINGDOM HEARTS III

HANDS-ON WITH THE LONG-AWAITED RPG

79

IT'S ALL TOO EASY TO BECOME DISTRACTED BY THE ADDITION OF PIXAR WORLDS AND CHARACTERS TO *KINGDOM HEARTS III*, BUT THERE'S A WHOLE LOT MORE TO THIS LONG-AWAITED SEQUEL THAN MERE FAN SERVICE ALONE.

Sure, you'll be able to cause havoc in the world of Toy Story with Buzz and Woody by your side, but what's more interesting is that there's more to the combat than ever before. *Kingdom Hearts II* featured fairly simple button-mash-friendly action-RPG systems that only became a challenge once you raised the difficulty up to brutally punishing levels. *Kingdom Hearts III*, on the other hand, aims to tone down the mashing and keep players engaged at all times (and across all difficulty levels) thanks to rapidly changing combat.

Some of these ideas are new, while others are drafted from a decade-plus of spin-offs and side-distractions. Protagonist Sora feels more mobile, while his signature Keyblade weapon can transform into different forms depending on what you've got equipped. In our hands-on, a Monsters Inc.-themed blade could transform into a set of enormous yo-yos that handled uniquely, offering a sort of area-of-effect melee move set to help decimate hordes of enemies in record time. Others add completely different types of abilities; the Tangled Keyblade turns into a magical staff, awarding you with ranged, mage-like abilities and unlocking a whole new combat style.

This focus on keeping things fresh also leaks into world design and series staple mechanics. One new summon ally is the titular character from *Wreck-It Ralph*, with the player taking direct control to build and destroy barriers around enemies. Little mechanics like this feel dynamic and exciting in a way Kingdom Hearts hasn't before, with this vision carrying over to world design that features more interactive touches and gimmicks that we found to be charming and satisfying.

This is the stuff that we found most exciting about *Kingdom Hearts III*. We're pumped to adventure in the worlds of Pixar and are thrilled at how gorgeous it looks, but by far the most exciting thing about this long-awaited sequel is how it appears to be working hard to add significant depth to the series' now-dated formula.

Kingdom Hearts III doesn't feel outdated at all; it does, in fact, feel pretty fresh, rejuvenated even. The way you can joyfully ricochet from one unique mechanic to another within the flow of combat without interruption only helps contribute to the overwhelming feeling that Square Enix has created a playable theme park here.

The Disney crossover elements are, of course, as charming as ever, and yes, there's still a sprinkling of convoluted plot lines in sight, but all of this is familiar and to be expected. The way this game handles feels new. Where exactly that magical Disney fairy dust has been for the last ten years of stodgy spin-offs we don't know, but with *Kingdom Hearts III* the series feels like it finally has its mojo back.



505 GAMES • REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT • TBC 2019

CONTROL

A NEW SINGLE-PLAYER GAME FROM AN OLD FRIEND

80

REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT HAS BEEN DORMANT SINCE THE RELEASE OF 2016'S *QUANTUM BREAK*. Now that we know what it's been working on, the supernatural third-person shooter called *Control*, we understand why the wait was absolutely worth it.

Control stars Jesse Faden, a woman searching for clarity regarding secrets in her past. The world she knows has been corrupted by some otherworldly force called The Hiss, and her fight against it leads her down a strange rabbit hole. She finds a hidden branch of government called the Federal Bureau of Control, and things just get weirder from there.

In an industry filled with multiplayer games *Control* focuses only on single player, with Remedy being more concerned with telling a good story through its gameplay than anything else. The tense action when fighting creatures born of The Hiss, while also navigating a structure that constantly changes as the story progresses is a good start toward that narrative goal.

If *Alan Wake* and *Quantum Break* are any indication, *Control* will be a fantastic story experience with plenty of action, puzzles and cliffhangers to keep us guessing until the very end. The physics bending action and sci-fi twists it's promising fall squarely into Remedy's greatest strengths as a game-making powerhouse, which is very promising.



MICROSOFT STUDIOS • THE COALITION • TBC 2019

GEARS TACTICS

A NEW WAY TO PLAY GEARS OF WAR

81

One of a trio of new Gears games coming soon, *Gears Tactics* takes the series out of its shooter roots and into a brand-new, turn-based strategy format. Set 12 years before the original *Gears of War*, *Tactics* throws us right into the Locust Wars and lets us play out large-scale battles against the Horde.

Brief gameplay snippets showed a grisly sniper headshot, turrets spraying Locust with bullets and a missile strike destroying a bridge and everyone on it. No firm release date was given so we don't know when we'll be getting *Gears Tactics*, but this feels like a good fit.



UBISOFT • UBISOFT TORONTO • 16 OCTOBER 2018

STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS

THE FINAL FRONTIER FOR TOYS-TO-LIFE GAMES

82

It seemed the toys-to-life phase had ended, but *Starlink: Battle for Atlas* will not let it die without a fight. The game's toy spaceships hook seamlessly onto the controller without adding weight, the parts allowing for full customisation through new proprietary technology. NFC this is not, folks.

The pot was sweetened further with the announcement that Fox McCloud and his Arwing from Star Fox would feature exclusively on the Nintendo Switch version, making this the new Star Fox game we had always wanted. Even without Fox *Starlink*'s space combat showed promise, but now it's a game that demands our attention.

MICROSOFT STUDIOS • PLAYGROUND GAMES • 2 OCT 2018

FORZA HORIZON 4

THE GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME

83

WHILE RACING GAMES ARE GENERALLY RENOWNED FOR THEIR GLAMOROUS LOCATIONS, THIS TIME DEVELOPER PLAYGROUND GAMES HAS BROUGHT ITS FESTIVAL-FEEL FORZA HORIZON 4 HOME BY SETTING IT WITHIN THE MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS OF THIS GLORIOUS LITTLE ISLAND OF OURS, GREAT BRITAIN.

Promising franchise-first features such as a fully online environment and true open-world exploration, *Forza Horizon 4* will draw together its community for worldwide events and challenges that change and update every week. Dynamic seasons invite you to experience a range of driving conditions across wet, muddy, snowy and icy conditions that improve, and worsen, depending upon the time of day and weather. So no, we're not just going to experience bleak, fizzy drizzle and sun-scorched Brits wandering around in a daze, complaining about the heat.

Expect over 450 cars – which, naturally, include some stunning vintage British vehicles – and a "beautiful, historic Britain" presented in native 4K, HDR, and a 60fps mode for X-players.

It's set to feature Microsoft's Play Anywhere, which means you'll be able to play on either your Windows 10 PC and Xbox One console (providing you buy directly from the MS Store, of course). It'll also be available through the Xbox Games Pass subscription from launch.



Changing seasons in the shared game world should offer an interesting new twist to the experience, but we're hoping it won't be realistic to British weather patterns, otherwise there won't be a lot of variety on offer.



11-BIT STUDIOS • DEAD MAGE INC. • TBC 2018

CHILDREN OF MORTA

MORTA COMBAT

84

In-between the triple-A teasers elbowing for space this year, there were several indie jewels secreted between the blockbusters, and *Children Of Morta* is one such example. Select from the many fighting styles of the Bergson family – each with their own emotional struggles and back stories – as they roam, slash, solve, conjure, loot, co-operate, and love. Aww.



SQUARE ENIX • IN-HOUSE • 4 SEP 2018

DRAGON QUEST XI

DRAGON ON AN ON AND ON

85

Dragon Quest is finally back with its 11th edition, this time subtitled *Echoes Of An Elusive Age*. If you've had a peek and are tempted by that beautiful world but feel a little overwhelmed by the ten previous games you've missed, don't be; creator Yuji Horii promises a standalone experience featuring all-new characters and a story that'll appeal to franchise veterans and newbies alike.



DEVOLVER • DEADTOAST ENTERTAINMENT • TBC 2019

MY FRIEND PEDRO

B-A-N-A-N-A-S!

86

"This game doesn't look like other things you've played in the past" Steam tells us when we visit the *MFP* storefront. Which is completely fair, as it's described as "a violent ballet about friendship, imagination, and one man's struggle to obliterate anyone in his path at the behest of a sentient banana". We don't really know what else to add to that.



DEVOLVER • FROMSOFTWARE/GENERAL ARCADE • TBC 2018

METAL WOLF CHAOS XD

MECH AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

87

Way before there was *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls*, there was FromSoftware's *Metal Wolf Chaos*, an original Xbox third-person shooter only available to our friends in Japan. It's taken almost 15 years, but it's *finally* being localised for the West, modernised by General Arcade, and complete with boosted graphics, a refined control scheme, a new save system, and 4K support, too.



UBISOFT • UBISOFT SINGAPORE • TBC 2019

SKULL & BONES

SMUGGLER'S BAE

88

Though we've been plunderin' *Sea Of Thieves'* waters for some time now, we've still yet to lay our hands on Ubisoft's interpretation of life on the high seas. Amazingly, *Skull & Bones* is still many months away, but the gameplay appears to be shaping up around multiplayer combat first and foremost. Will be a very different pace of game to Rare's offering.



JASON ODA • IN-HOUSE • TBC 2018

WAKING

DREAM WEAVER

89

Waking's curious premise sees you trapped in a coma, battling your own subconscious. By finding and customising the treasures of your life, this emotional action game takes a unique spin on combat as you fight with your cherished belongings and the memories of the people you love to repair the synapses of your brain. Keep an eye on this one – we think it's going to be amazing.



CAPCOM • IN-HOUSE • Q1 2019

RESIDENT EVIL 2 REMAKE

GAMES ONLY GET BETTER WITH AGE

90

WHEN IT RELEASED IN 1998, *RESIDENT EVIL 2* WAS HERALDED AS ONE OF THE FINEST SURVIVAL-HORROR GAMES OF ALL TIME. With this upcoming remake, well, we think it will just about have sealed the deal. Capcom is doing a truly incredible job with this, taking the original game and reinventing it for new audiences with the same state-of-the-art tools and engine that helped establish *Resident Evil VII* as a modern classic.

The bones of the old pixelated Racoon City can be found in the new design, but you've never seen it presented like this before. Not only is it visually stunning – truly one of the best-looking games coming in 2019 – but it also feels surprisingly fresh, with Capcom shifting the perspective from fixed camera to a system more in-line with the one seen in *Resident Evil 4*. That's right! The tank controls are back, and oh how we have missed them dearly.

What's impressive is that – from what we've seen, at least – so many of the original frights, the classic moments and memorable scenes have been retained, presented from a fresh perspective. It all comes together to make *Resident Evil 2* feel like a brand-new game experience, albeit one built on the foundations of one of the greatest survival-horror games of all time. Whatever you do, don't sleep on this one.



SLOW BROS. • IN-HOUSE • TBC 2019

HAROLD HALIBUT

AN UNBELIEVABLE FEAT OF CREATIVITY

91

Harold Halibut is without question one of the most impressive, creative and ambitious games in development – taking on *Cuphead* for the crown of ridiculous game creation ideas. In this upcoming nautical-themed adventure almost every object is handmade. It's a stop-motion inspired work of art that we can't wait to play more of; this one is going to be special.



BANDAI NAMCO • IN-HOUSE • 19 OCTOBER 2018

JUMP FORCE

PURE FAN SERVICE

92

Some of the biggest characters from the Bandai Namco family of licenses are coming together in this epic new crossover; a fan-service fighting game designed for manga lovers the world over. Fans should expect to see characters from the likes of Dragon Ball, One Piece, Naruto and many more uniting in a way that we've never seen before.



BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • ID SOFTWARE • TBC 2018

QUAKE CHAMPIONS

FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

93

Yes, *Quake Champions* is still alive and kicking. The arena shooter was announced way back in 2016, but there is still no release date in sight. Thankfully, Bethesda has been ramping up its public play testing of the title, so be sure to keep an eye out for any opportunities to play it in the coming weeks. It's a whole lot of fun!





CHUCKLEFISH · TBC 2018

WARGROOVE

94 For a long time we've been charmed by *Wargroove*'s style and presentation, along with the fact that it's clearly inspired by *Advance Wars*, but seeing it in action is equally impressive. The tactical battle of capturing towns to increase income, capturing barracks for mid-battlefield reinforcements, as well as hero abilities to reshape the battle make for excellent conflicts.



CAPYBARA GAMES · TBC 2018

BELOW

95 How long have we been waiting for *Below*? Not as long as Capybara has been making it, and the quality that the team has managed to achieve with all of that development time is really showing. *Below* is dark and challenging, but the level of detail in the game world, lighting and systems is fantastic. Delving into the darkest depths of this game is going to be a fascinating journey.



NIGHT SCHOOL STUDIO · TBC 2018

AFTERPARTY

96 Having a drinking game with the devil was always going to grab our attention, and speaking with the team in our recent feature we got to learn a lot about its non-linear narrative approach and how different stories can emerge or be missed. Getting to see the game in motion is something else though. It is both darker and more hilarious than the concept lets you know.



GLUMBERLAND · TBC 2018

OOBLETS

97 We got our first proper look at the dance battle combat of *Ooblets* recently, and it's just as adorable as you would imagine. It was going to feature something similar to the Pokémon battle system, but this feels more in keeping with the tone of the game. Other Ooblets gather with boom boxes as the dancing pair square off. We expect each will have their own style too.



FOAM SWORD · TBC 2018

KNIGHTS AND BIKES

100 We were delighted to see Foam Sword picking up all sorts of game of the show awards at E3. This homage to classic RPGs and growing up in a small town deserves the accolades and attention it's getting, as we explored in our feature a few issues back. There's not a lot new to report, but if you're unfamiliar, it's a story of two friends trying to find a treasure to save their town.



MOTION TWIN · TBC 2018

DEAD CELLS

99 This Castlevania-inspired roguelike has been doing well in Early Access thanks in large part to fantastic combat mechanics and weapon variety. Together they create an action experience that is faster than anything we've seen from the genre. At times it feels more like a 2D Devil May Cry (minus the juggling). The final release will be very exciting.



AURORA44 · TBC 2018

ASHEN

98 While *Ashen* wasn't front and centre at E3, it still had an excellent showing in LA, with a lot more gameplay and story elements revealed. It's PvE only, although other players can join your game, essentially taking on the role of your NPC mission givers and joining you on the road. We still love the art style, and the action loop is looking very strong.

Microsoft's showcase has largely been seen as the best of E3 this year, dazzling us with game after game, whether it was exclusive or not.

MICROSOFT COMMITS TO THE FUTURE

THE NEXT-GEN RACE IS OFFICIALLY ON



Gears 5 and *Halo Infinite* were the headline grabbers in terms of first-party announcements, although *Forza Horizon 4* really impressed.

Crackdown 3 has been delayed into 2019 as development continues to prove challenging. Our hopes aren't really very high for this one anymore.

IT WAS ONLY FOUR YEARS AGO THAT INCOMING MICROSOFT CEO SATYA NADELLA TOLD FORTUNE MAGAZINE THAT THE XBOX DIVISION WAS NOT THE CORE OF THE BUSINESS. Now, following a great deal of rethinking and restructuring around the business, he has told investors that Xbox is the "killer asset" for its ventures into streaming and augmented reality. We bring all of this up because for years, even before the launch of the Xbox One and its trouncing by the PS4, there has been talk that Microsoft should sell off its Xbox interest. Phil Spencer took the stage at E3, his first time there since his promotion to executive vice president of gaming, reporting directly to Nadella, and announced to the world that Microsoft was committed to the future of gaming, not just this generation, but for the next as well.

It's unusual for a games company to openly announce its next-generation intentions so clearly and openly, but Xbox is in an unusual position. By any traditional measure the Xbox One has sold well. It currently sits at an estimated 37 million, which isn't too shabby in five years, but lags behind where the Xbox 360 was in the same timeframe and way behind the PS4 with nearly 80 million. So while the Xbox One X allows the company to refer to itself as the maker of the most powerful console on the market, it also needs to get its pitch out there for what comes next, but it's an important dual-pronged approach.

You see, the business concern around announcing your next hardware too early is that it sucks up all of the interest in your machines. Why buy an Xbox One S or X if there's a new machine around the corner? The second prong offers the answer; backwards compatibility means you won't have wasted your money. The Xbox



team has committed to backwards compatibility more than ever before, and the implicit promise of a new generation of Xbox machines is that they will all be compatible with what you're playing now. It's also not entirely implausible that it will also be forward-compatible, allowing current-gen players access to the next generation of games with some downgrades, but that's just speculation on our part.

Less speculative is the likelihood that the next Xbox – we'll say the Xbox Two for the sake of ease – will not be a single piece of hardware, but a family of machines, much as the Xbox One has become. The concept of different entry points for hardware seems to have won favour at Microsoft, as it offers affordability or performance depending on your means and priorities, broadening the potential player base Xbox can draw in. And the Xbox One S is close enough in terms of performance and features that no one appears to be feel particularly short-changed by the deal.

So multiple machines appears to be the direction Microsoft will continue to move in, but what else can we discern? For a start, it appears HoloLens is getting closer to a full release, possibly as early as 2019, so that could end up becoming part of the Xbox Two strategy. If VR interest picks up a little more in the next two years then VR might also become a pillar of the next generation, but that remains unclear at the moment.

> "WE'RE INCREASING OUR INVESTMENT TO THE FRANCHISES AND WORLDS YOU ALREADY LOVE. WE'RE MAKING ONE OF OUR GREATEST SINGLE-YEAR INVESTMENTS IN TEAMS AND TALENT BY ADDING FIVE NEW CREATIVE STUDIOS"
> PHIL SPENCER, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF GAMING

Far more clear cut is that Microsoft will be looking to close the gap on first-party exclusives with PlayStation now that it has announced five new studios are joining the Microsoft Studios umbrella. While bringing in Undead Labs and Playground Games formalises long-standing exclusive relationships, the capture of Hellblade developer Ninja Theory and We Happy Few team Compulsion Games are big coups. Both teams are creatively ambitious, but have been modest in their aims due to financial constraints for smaller indie teams. Under Microsoft, both should be able to let loose. Ninja Theory itself has already committed to bringing its full development team of around 100 people to bear on its next exclusive project, moving up its planned timeline following the success of Hellblade.

It doesn't solve Microsoft's lack of exclusives this year, but it may begin to help in the next two or three years, and with the addition of a new Santa Monica studio in The Initiative, the development side of Xbox is looking a lot stronger now than it did 12 months ago. Phil Spencer has overseen a major turnaround for Xbox, has rebuilt its reputation and reshaped its identity, and now there's a clear focus on the next step. New console, new games and new creative partnerships are at the heart of that vision, and that is a very exciting combination.

MICROSOFT'S NEW STUDIOS

A CLOSER LOOK AT WHO IS JOINING THE FIRST-PARTY ROSTER

UNDEAD LABS



Having partnered with Microsoft back in 2011 as the only publisher that didn't want to interfere with its vision for a zombie survival experience, bringing Undead Labs officially into the fold makes a lot of sense. The studio was founded on making zombie games, but it will be interesting to see if its history with live game experiences could prove influential.

COMPULSION GAMES



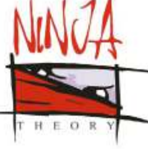
We Happy Few has been a long time in development, having been an early release for Xbox's Game Preview platform, but even before that the team has shown its willingness to make curious, creative and artistically unique videogames. The backing of Microsoft could allow for some much larger and even more ambitious projects in the future.

PLAYGROUND GAMES



The team behind Forza Horizon since its inception, Playground has been a de facto exclusive developer for many years now, but this formalises the relationship. We already know that the team is working on a RPG project of some kind, with our minds leaping to a possible return for Fable. Either way, it's a massively important studio for Microsoft moving forward.

NINJA THEORY



The team behind the multi award-winning *Hellblade*, previous maker of *Heavenly Sword*, *DmC* and *Enslaved*, it wasn't that long ago that the Cambridge outfit was in danger of going under. But a bold move to attempt a triple-A indie release has paid off, and having been promised creative freedom by Microsoft, the future looks incredibly bright.

THE INITIATIVE



Headed up by former Crystal Dynamics studio head and Activision head of product development and studios Darrell Gallagher, The Initiative is a brand new studio being set up in Santa Monica. Not a bad spot to pick off talent from neighbouring Sony Santa Monica or Treyarch, but also ideally placed for college graduates in the area too.

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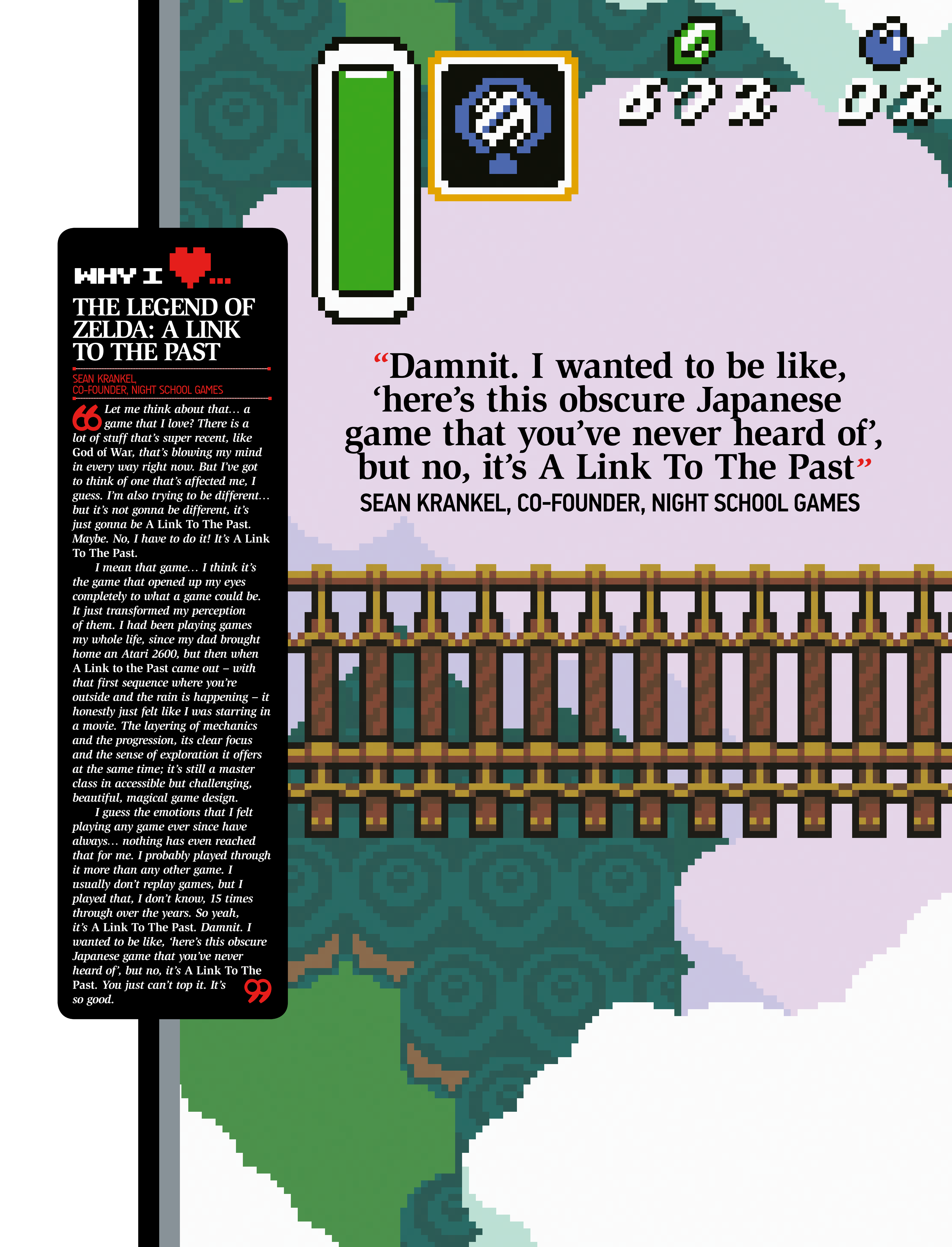
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WHY I ❤...

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST

SEAN KRANKEL
CO-FOUNDER, NIGHT SCHOOL GAMES

"Let me think about that… a game that I love? There is a lot of stuff that's super recent, like God of War, *that's blowing my mind in every way right now. But I've got to think of one that's affected me, I guess. I'm also trying to be different… but it's not gonna be different, it's just gonna be* A Link To The Past. *Maybe. No, I have to do it! It's* A Link To The Past.

I mean that game… I think it's the game that opened up my eyes completely to what a game could be. It just transformed my perception of them. I had been playing games my whole life, since my dad brought home an Atari 2600, *but then when* A Link to the Past *came out – with that first sequence where you're outside and the rain is happening – it honestly just felt like I was starring in a movie. The layering of mechanics and the progression, its clear focus and the sense of exploration it offers at the same time; it's still a master class in accessible but challenging, beautiful, magical game design.*

I guess the emotions that I felt playing any game ever since have always… nothing has even reached that for me. I probably played through it more than any other game. I usually don't replay games, but I played that, I don't know, 15 times through over the years. So yeah, it's A Link To The Past. *Damnit. I wanted to be like, 'here's this obscure Japanese game that you've never heard of', but no, it's* A Link To The Past. *You just can't top it. It's so good."*

"Damnit. I wanted to be like, 'here's this obscure Japanese game that you've never heard of', but no, it's A Link To The Past"

SEAN KRANKEL, CO-FOUNDER, NIGHT SCHOOL GAMES

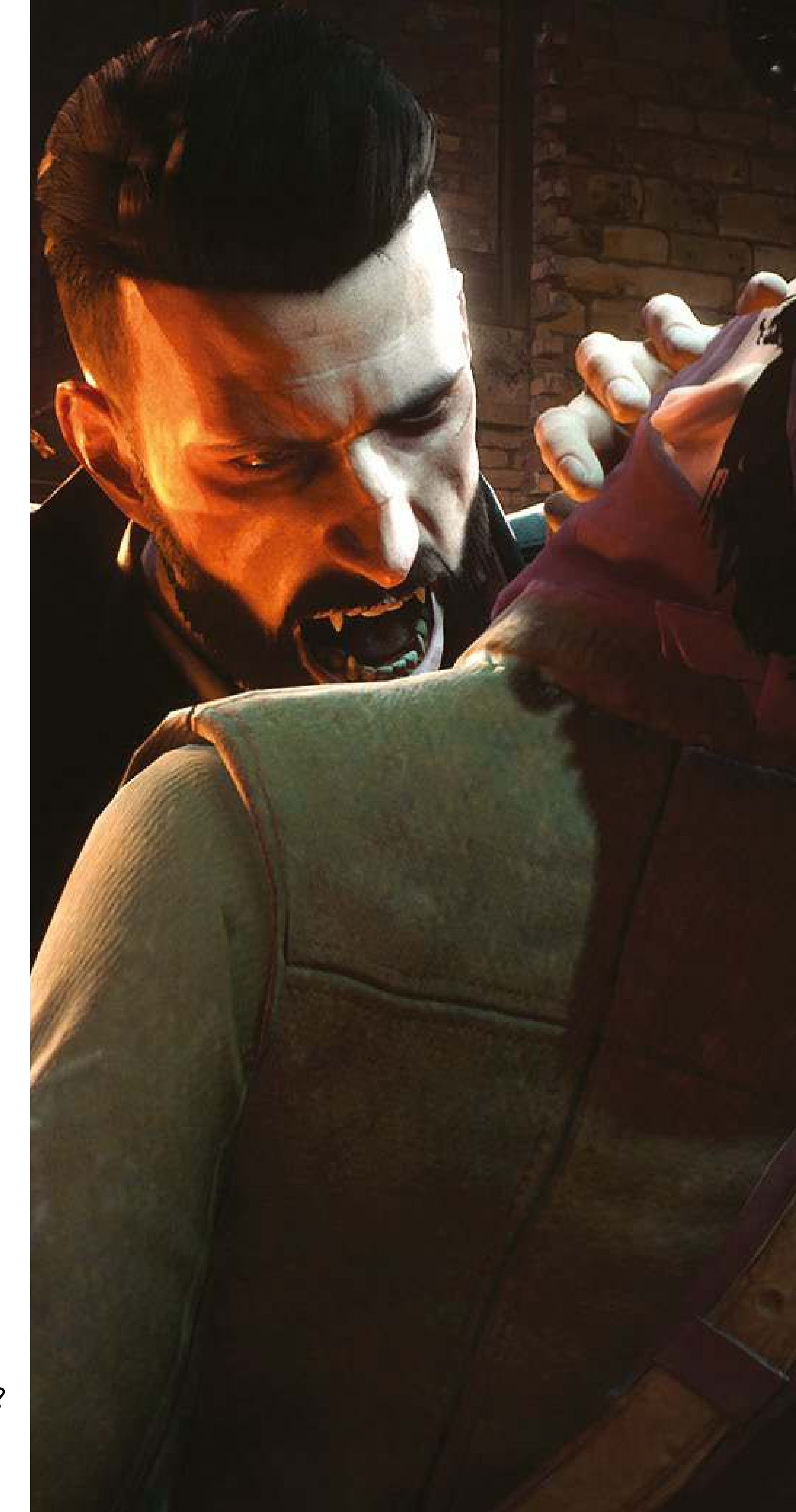

LIFE

Reviews

68

VAMPYR

Has Dontnod managed to sprinkle some *Life Is Strange* magic on its undead adventure, or is it more of a pain in the neck?

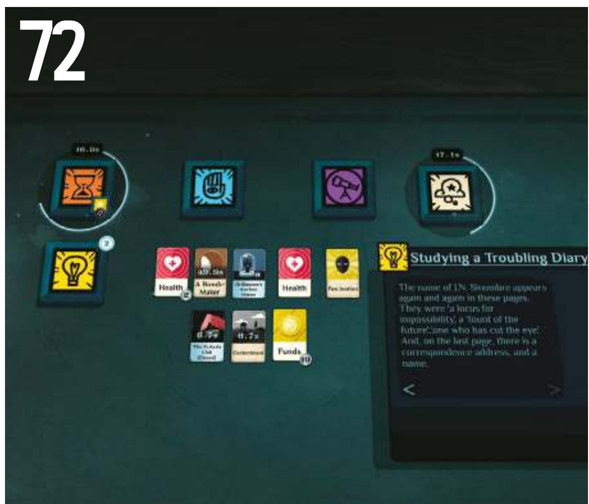




THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:

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BETTER LEFT UNDISTURBED IN THE SHADOWS

Vampyr

There is an argument to be made that *Vampyr* represents the quintessential Dontnod experience. Although that is, of course, something of a loaded statement. The seasoned studio has but a small body of work to its name; creatively adventurous, high-concept titles that often straddle an ever-blurring line between charming ambition and middling execution. But in spite of Dontnod's best efforts *Vampyr* arrives with many of the problems of *Remember Me*, none of the charm of *Life Is Strange*, and a handful of perplexing issues of its own design that, ultimately, coalesce to create an experience as creatively intoxicating as it is consistently frustrating.

The game works to ensure that every decision you make – no matter how large, small or seemingly inconsequential – has ramifications that echo out across the meticulously crafted game world and the eclectic cast of characters that inhabit it. In theory this has all the makings of one hell of a fantastic vampire story, something this medium is in dire need of.

Taking on the role of Doctor Jonathan Reid – a renowned blood specialist turned vampire – you are forced to explore the conflict between Reid's natural desire to save lives and his new hunger to take them. It's a killer concept that never quite comes together as intended. *Vampyr* struggles to deal with the uncomfortable dissonance created by your actions in the moment-to-moment play and the themes that to tie it all together.

The game conveys, undoubtedly, a compelling narrative thread in spite of the problems that arise within it. It's set out across an interesting time in history too. Prowling the streets of London circa 1918, we meet a populous struggling with the fallout of a war, an outbreak of Spanish Influenza that is sweeping through the city and, of course, the shadow politics of creatures that haunt the streets at night. *Vampyr* introduces us to

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Paris
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Dontnod
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

MURDERED SOUL SUSPECT



WORSE THAN



REMEMBER ME



Above: Dontnod has cherry picked parts of classic vampire lore here, retaining some elements (such as burning crosses) and thrown out others (Jonathan can see his reflection, for example). You'll need to be invited into buildings to enter, creating a few interesting gameplay situations.

Below: Combat is one of the most unbelievably frustrating parts of *Vampyr*. You are thrown from one altercation to the next, having to deal with unintuitive and tactless battles every step of the way. It feels like an unnecessary addition to the game, dragging it down at every opportunity.

FOR A GAME TO FOCUS SO HEAVILY ON CHARACTER, THE PEOPLE YOU ENCOUNTER OFFER SURPRISINGLY LITTLE OF IT



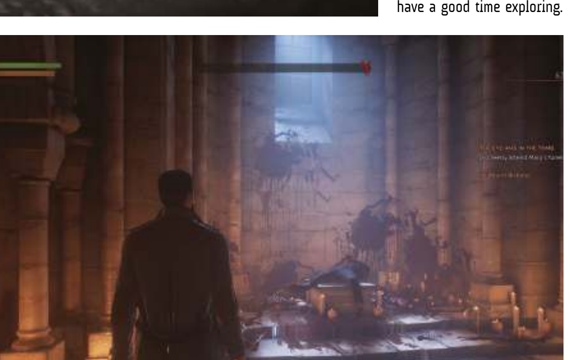
FAQs

Q. IS IT REALLY THAT BAD?
It is just entirely average. If you're intrigued by a new vampire game then give it a shot, but be prepared for frustrating combat and tiresome dialogue.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
You'll likely be looking at a 30-hour game time, although that will shift heavily depending on how you decide to approach the story.

Q. CAN YOU ABSTAIN FROM FEEDING?
You can, and it's one of the more interesting ways to play. Beware however, sometimes regions will destabilise in spite of your best efforts.

Below: While most of the game is basked in shadow, it's also pretty flat and featureless. This rendition of London isn't one you'll have a good time exploring.



a diverse, seemingly autonomous, cast of characters bound into tight-knit communities by a shared experience of fear, strife and sacrifice. It's here where Dontnod attempts to play with your conscience to ultimately determine the direction of the story, the difficulty of the combat, and the outcome for the world and its characters.

The studio has taken steps to make certain that your decisions – that of whether you spare of sacrifice any of the named NPCs you encounter on your journey – permanent, impacting everything from the stability of regions to the displacement of entire communities. While previous Dontnod games looked to use memory manipulation to contort your emotional resonance with the narrative, *Vampyr* instead uses time as a weapon. It asks you to construct your own moral code within its world quickly and proceed accordingly, all the while the cycle between night and day plummets London further into disarray. Will you cure the residents in a certain district only to feed on them when they are back at full strength (integral to receiving maximum XP to evolve Reid and his power set), or will you decide to abstain from feasting entirely, struggling through the game's atrocious, floaty combat and frustrating button-bash boss battles in an effort to retain what remains of your humanity?

Vampyr attempts to present itself as a game of grey areas. But the truth is that it's actually fairly black and white; you can approach the world in any way you want to, deciding how you deal with each character and sub-plot as you want to, but you won't always be content with the results that it generates for you. In fact, much of the game actually rests on just a few key plot decisions – it's surprisingly linear, ultimately making the pomp and circumstance placed upon saving and sparing lives feel somewhat overwrought when it's all said and done.

While each of the characters you encounter have cleverly constructed personalities and relationships, much of the emotional weight that is supposed to drive your decisions as a conflicted vampire fail to resonate as intended. The voice acting often comes across as flat and charmless, while the writing itself is ponderous and bloated. For a game to focus so heavily on character, the people you encounter offer surprisingly little of it.

Vampyr makes it very difficult to become invested in its world. It throws you constantly between unsatisfying and frustrating combat scenarios with faceless vampire hunters who you are forced to mercilessly slay in service of your own demented mission to forge your own moral compass. Deliberating over whether you should spare or sacrifice the life of a named NPC seems particularly redundant, for example, after hacking and slashing through tens of 'enemies' just to reach them. Combine this with a multitude of bugs, consistent framerate stuttering and regular game freezes and you'll quickly find a game that offers little more than a good idea and a bad time.

Dontnod brings some truly excellent systems and ideas to the fore here, but it just isn't able to pull them together into a succinct experience. The game constantly seeks to undermine itself at almost every turn, dispatching its own internal logic in between combat sequences and failing to hold the attention past its middling opening chapters. *Vampyr* has a bold and ambitious concept at its heart, but the execution is sorely lacking, so while it may be packed with good intentions, it's not really worth the effort.

FINGERPRINT

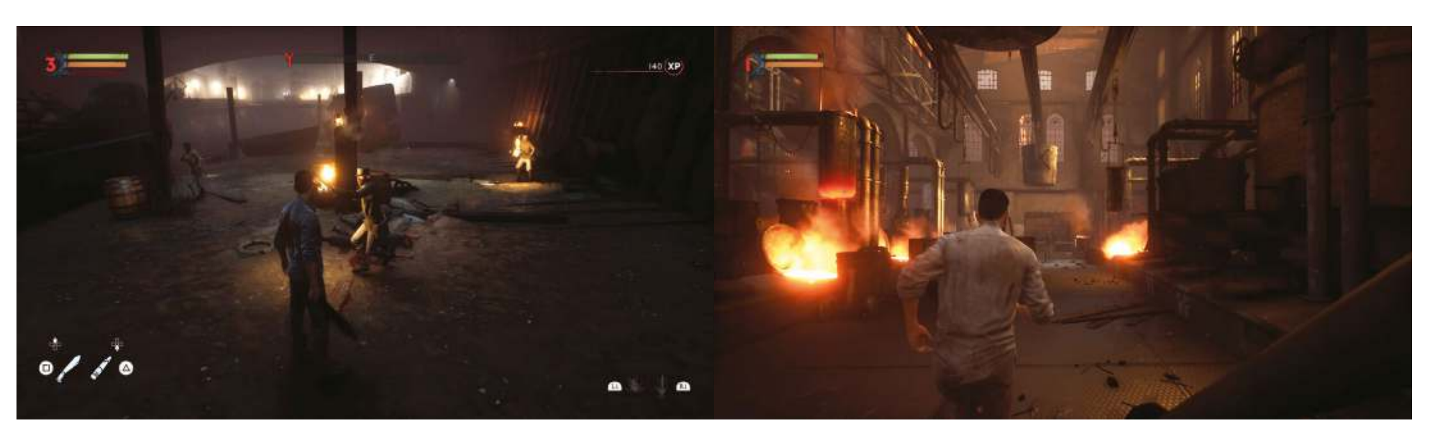
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

VARIETY: With a wide cast of characters, it's down to you to decide who to help and who to kill, building a world that feels like it has a bit of life to it.

FEED THE BEAST

Vampyr has an interesting way of navigating game difficulty. As Jonathan Reid is a brand new vampire, his need to feed is a constant annoyance – though big decisions will need to be made to satisfy the blood lust. Small amounts of XP will be earned through killing enemies in combat or completing the main missions or side quests, but if you really want to dig into the sprawling evolution skill trees and unlock the best powers, you'll need to start sacrificing the named NPCs. It's an interesting method of mitigating difficulty in a story-driven game, although it can often feel a little unfair – particularly as the streets begin to fill ever more so with enemies; unnamed NPCs that the game doesn't reward you for killing.

VERDICT 4/10
GOOD GAMES AREN'T MADE ON GOOD IDEAS ALONE



Above: The dinos themselves look fantastic, although they often don't behave as you might expect – raptors, for instance, would rather just fight and die solo than work in groups to survive.

OPERATION MASTER SYSTEM

Jurassic World Evolution

Scientists have been arguing for centuries about what drove the dinosaurs to extinction millions of years ago. Meteor impacts, ice ages, disease, volcanoes and all manner of other theories have been floated, but now, in 2018, Frontier has come out to posit a brand new thesis – what if the dinosaurs were just too stupid to understand their most basic survival needs?

We've seen herbivores bemoan the lack of trees in their habitat, too dumb to turn around and see the lush forests behind them. We've had raptors freak out after nearly dying of starvation despite there being multiple food and water sources within easy reach. We've witnessed usually docile creatures go ballistic on account of being surrounded by too many other dinosaurs while the popcorn-chomping bipedal hordes that surround them are apparently fine. These critters really aren't that smart.

In the interest of equality, though, Frontier has also gone out of its way to make humanity come across as every bit as dense as the spotlight-hogging reptilian anachronisms. One particular highlight was trying to isolate the cause of a dinosaur escape in our park, scouring fences for breaks, only to find that a ranger team had just left the pen gate open – presumably the first thing these wardens would be trained not to do when dealing with 20-foot predators from millions of years ago. They need constant instructions even when they're not goofing off like that – none of your park staff will lift a finger until instructed to do so, even when it comes to rudimentary tasks like topping up dino food supplies or trying to contain escaped creatures. It sort of makes sense on a gameplay level, since you'd have little to do as a player if your park staff were actually efficient on their own. It's slow-going at the best of times, so this slightly fiddly micromanagement is actually somewhat welcome.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Frontier
DEVELOPER: Koch Media
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

LAYOUTS ARE PRETTY LIMITED WITH NO COSMETIC OPTIONS TO JAZZ UP YOUR ATTRACTIONS

Aside from how slow it is in general, the main issue with *Evolution* is how little it does to build upon the foundations set by its spiritual predecessor, *Operation Genesis*. This is a team that is far from inexperienced when it comes to park management games, yet still *Evolution* feels like it's playing out in cruise control mode the entire time, coasting on the core mechanics that made *Operation Genesis* a fan favourite while adding little to nothing of its own. General park operations are oddly hands-off (you have no control over basic things like ticket prices and precious little useful feedback from attendees, for instance), layouts are pretty limited with no cosmetic options to jazz up your attractions, progression with the three factions is tied to randomly assigned missions – the list



FAQs

HOW MANY DIFFERENT SPECIES ARE THERE?

The base game has a total of 42 dinos to unlock, with an additional six added as free DLC. They're all land-based species though, sadly.

HOW MANY ISLANDS?

Six in total – five play out as increasingly challenging campaign scenarios, with the sixth a free-play sandbox where you can mess around with everything you've unlocked so far.

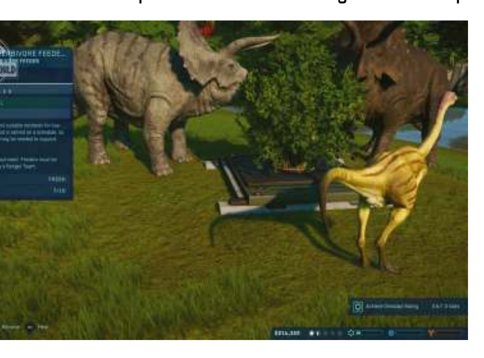
ARE THE MOVIE CAST IN IT?

Jeff Goldblum is on board, and they really get their money's worth out of him – he narrates more or less everything. The rest seem to be decent soundalikes as far as we could tell.

Below: Yeah, that pen is way too small for a creature that big. Even peaceful herbivores will rampage if they're not happy with their living standards, and some of them can be extraordinarily picky.

THE LAND BEFORE TIME

One glaring omission is the lack of aerial and water-dwelling dinosaurs, particularly when the movies have made such a point of featuring those prominently. These other types of species would lend some much-needed variety to planning park layouts and varying dino enclosures, which currently extends only so far as balancing the right amount of grassland and foliage to keep your critters comfortable. Every park ends up feeling like it's following much the same structure – a couple of solo pens for your big-ticket dinos, some mid-sized areas to house a small selection of herbivores and carnivores (housed separately of course, unless you're some kind of monster), and a large open enclosure for your stompy longnecks to stretch their massive legs in. It's also a little frustrating that you can't check a dinosaur's needs before actually birthing it, so get used to throwing away hundreds of thousands of dollars as you introduce a new attraction only to find that it doesn't play well with others or demands company, which you sometimes aren't even able to provide for it until after it's gone on the warpath.





Left: Taking direct control of ranger jeeps is actually sort of fun, although you'll often need to take over simply because the path-finding is so bad. The *Pokémon Snap*-esque photography mode almost makes up for it, though. Below: You have a little control over your facilities, but it's as basic as picking one of three products to sell, setting a price and assigning extra staff if demand gets too great.



of odd omissions and overly basic mechanics goes on. Perhaps this oversimplification can be traced back to trying to appeal to fans of the movies, which just seem to get more brain dead with each return to theatres. Would fans who believe Star-Lord can somehow talk to raptors and someone in heels can outrun a T-Rex really care for more detailed creature stats and management or more believable interactions between them? Would people who never question how these projects continue to get funding despite always ending in catastrophic failure actually appreciate a greater level of control over financials and general park operations? It very much feels like a game aimed at the same audience as the movies, an extremely basic park management sim for people who just really want to turn their brains off and look at the pretty dinosaurs.

Progress plays out across a handful of different scenarios, and there's the odd glimmer of creativity here that makes a couple stand out – most are just slight twists on the same format (working with limited space and cash to slowly ramp up your animals and attractions until you're making mega-bucks, but the one that dumps you into a failed park site and starts you in debt and needing to patiently and cleverly sell, repair, and replace facilities to turn the park around is the clear highlight. A little way in, you unlock Isla Nublar as the game's free-play mode of sorts, but it's crippled by the fact that you're limited to whatever research progress you've made during the main campaign, and so is pretty dull until you've unlocked more or less everything, at which point it's just a big, boring empty map on which to do exactly the same thing for the sixth time. Research carries over between maps, but cash arbitrarily does not, leading to some odd quirks, like being able to send dig teams on expensive excavations from a successful park before selling the spoils at a new site to get a quick injection of cash. Once you have a few decent dinos, cash stops being a problem anyway – punters will gladly throw money at your awkward maze of paths, enclosures and shops even right after an outbreak has seen hundreds of their own kind devoured. People just *really* love dinosaurs, we suppose.

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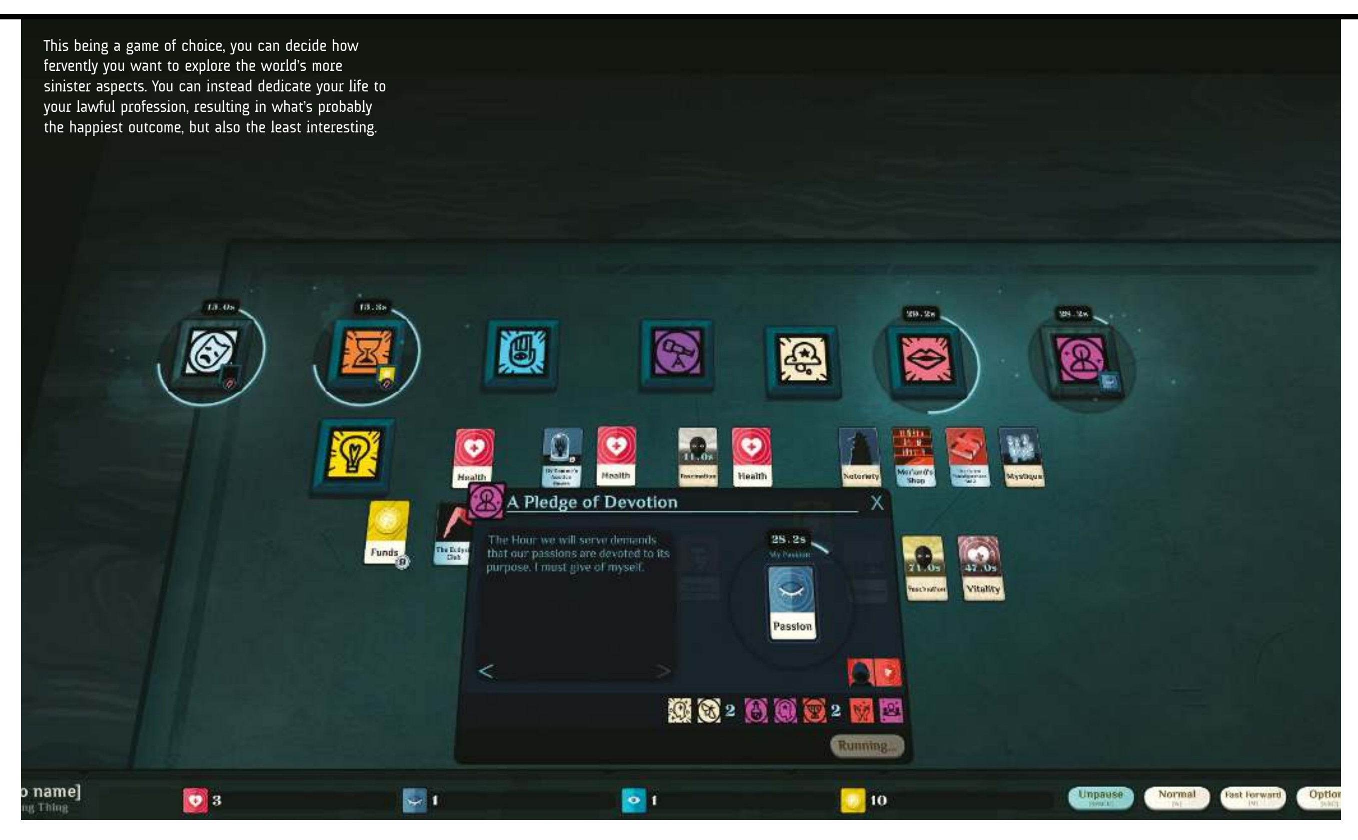
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DINO MIGHT: Unlocking new dinosaurs to bring back to life is extremely slow-going – don't expect to see anything remotely interesting until hours into the game.

Evolution isn't so much a bad game as a limited and somewhat laborious one. There's some degree of satisfaction to be gleaned from getting a well-running park set up, but it's also very easy – with a modicum of common sense, the only real obstacles to things running perfectly smoothly are random elements like storms, AI quirks and sabotage attacks. A title update with new *Fallen Kingdom* dinosaurs soon after release leaves us hopeful that Frontier will continue to add things to the game for a while, though it'd take a lot of updates to load it up with all the kinds of features and functionality that it feels like it's missing at the moment. Between its mechanical simplicity and pedestrian pace, *Jurassic World Evolution* somehow manages to make the childhood fantasy of bringing dinosaurs back to life boring, and that's criminal when dealing with such inherently interesting subject matter.

VERDICT 5/10

FAR LESS ENGAGING THAN IT SHOULD BE



This being a game of choice, you can decide how fervently you want to explore the world's more sinister aspects. You can instead dedicate your life to your lawful profession, resulting in what's probably the happiest outcome, but also the least interesting.

PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT

Cultist Simulator

Cults are relatively commonplace in our virtual realms, but *Cultist Simulator* turns conventions on their head. Ordinarily, you're placed in the shoes of some morally just hero on a mission to hunt down some sort of sinister group. *Cultist Simulator,* however, presents a darker, more twisted tale that sees you recruit, corrupt and manage your own perverse posse.

The tone of this narrative-driven card game is bleak from the outset; in the first few seconds you're made redundant, and the whole game is an uphill struggle from there as you precariously try to manage your earthly resources, physical health and mental wellbeing, as well as gather followers and pursue the invisible arts.

The essence of *Cultist Simulator* is choice and consequence, which forces you to take risks and experiment with multiple approaches. The minimalist interface sees you feed cards into different activities such as Work, Sleep, Study, Explore and Talk. Multiple cards can be played to yield different results. For example, playing a Reason card at work can lead to a better performance and a possible promotion, while exploring a stuffy old bookshop with some money can produce a dusty ancient tome that forms the basis of your cult's teachings.

Sinister activities, such as publicly preaching ancient texts and corrupting the populous, inevitably nets you some unwanted attention. Ignore bothersome busybodies, and you'll soon find yourself being hunted by the paranormal police. Fortunately, there are many ways to get meddlers off your back, some more extreme than others. Tired of a nosey policeman, we sent a follower off with funds to recruit some hired help, resulting in a card bearing the unfortunate constable's corpse appearing in our deck minutes later.

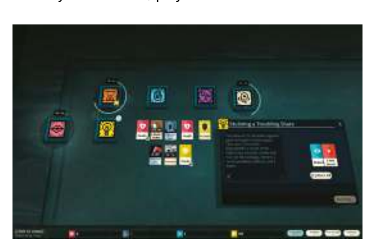
There are a plethora of dangers that threaten to topple this precarious house of cards. A timer constantly sucks away your funds, and running out of money means you'll quickly starve and die. The tension is considerably upped as you delve deeper into the mystical aspects of this malevolent world, where you'll have to contend with new and ever more unpredictable threats, like an inadvertently unleashed ancient curse or a summoned creature gone rogue.

As well as building a band of disciples and forming pacts with powerful entities, you're forced to endure a fair share of monotony; dealing with demanding bosses and work-related injuries is all part of the daily grind, and the presence of these worldly issues can quickly feel tiresome. Still, the monotony and mind-numbing quality of these aspects are part of what makes escaping them and exploring the dark arts of this grim Lovecraftian world so compelling. The wonderfully slow peeling back of the game's layers, the rich narrative, the scope for experimentation and the risk that comes with your every unorthodox endeavour makes this a card game that's worth getting dealt into.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DECISIONS, DECISIONS: Every choice you make not only advances the game's elaborate narrative, but also shapes it, allowing you to seek knowledge, power or simply vengeance on this harsh and uncaring world.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Humble Bundle
DEVELOPER: Weather Factory
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP or later, 2GHz CPU or better, 1 GB RAM, 1280x768 minimum resolution, DirectX 9.0c, 500 MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



BETTER THAN: HAND OF FATE 2

WORSE THAN: SUNLESS SEA



VERDICT 7/10

AN ENGROSSING DABBLE INTO OTHERWORLDLY FORCES

MUM VERSUS MOTHER NATURE

Smoke & Sacrifice

Mums so rarely get to be the protagonists that we're almost prepared to give this game top marks for that alone. What a rare thing to have motherhood at the centre of a videogame. *Smoke & Sacrifice* is a lot more than that though; it's a remarkably well put together survival RPG.

Firstly, it's a vibrant game. Every inch of the screen is filled with imagination and colour, without ever getting cluttered. It's a real testament to the art direction that the various monsters and characters leave quite the impression, especially the Pugbears, who are exactly what the name implies. The world is a blend of brass machinery, twisted swamps and icy wastelands, with technology fending off a black fog that kills humans.

To maintain this technology, the village, ruled by a cult, has one child sacrificed each year. It's our heroine Sachi's turn when the game begins, forced to give up her son Leo. The game picks up years later as the town's power begins to fail, leaving it open to attack from the surrounding wastes. Sachi then heads underground, where she finds a massive hidden ecosystem and a rumour that her son might still be alive.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Curve Digital
DEVELOPER: Solar Sail Games
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/8/8.1/10, Intel® Core™ i3-4130 / AMD Phenom™ II X4 or equivalent, 4 GB RAM, NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 650 / AMD Radeon™ HD 5770 / Intel® HD Graphics 530 or equivalent, DirectX 11, 4 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

DON'T STARVE



WORSE THAN



THE FOREST



Above: Different environments require different gear to survive – one early obstacle is finding warm clothes to explore the icy wastelands in, though you'll also need to consider protection from nasties too.

In her search she'll have to get crafting all sorts of gadgets and weapons to survive the various monsters lurking around. The game presents a diverse ecosystem of beasties, and then lets you exploit their behaviours and abilities against each other. This isn't just about crafting better gear; knowing just how to lure that exploding jellyfish into that herd of spike-spitting boars is what's going to get you ahead.

The time of day also plays into it, changing monster behaviours and the kind of items they drop, so you'll need to take advantage. With each new area the rules change, and you'll have to figure things out all over again. The way this world develops and expands your interactions is a joy worth sinking the hours into.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

STORY-DRIVEN OPEN-WORLD SURVIVAL RPG: That's a mouthful, but it's quite a spectacular blend of ingredients, with a story that binds them all together perfectly.

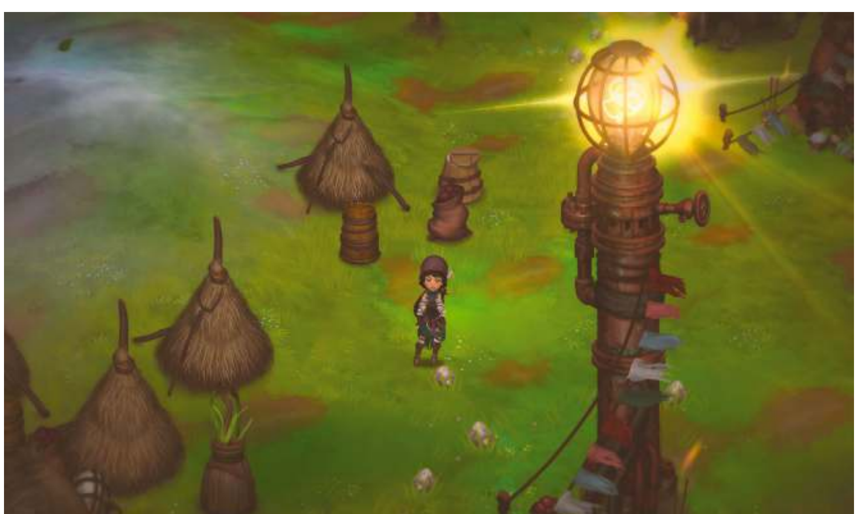
Comparisons will be drawn to *Don't Starve*, but the differences are significant. For starters, *Smoke & Sacrifice*'s combat is a bit more involved instead of a rapid mashing of buttons. This means dealing with enemies is part of the whole instead of an inconvenience. More than that, it's also a much more story-driven affair. It has quests and NPCs, with boss fights for good measure. This is about Sachi's search for her son, and the game never loses sight of that.

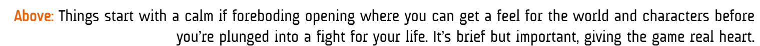
While its story doesn't quite have the emotional heft it could have had with more character development, it nonetheless gives players a drive, and a reason to persist through a harsh world.



VERDICT 8/10

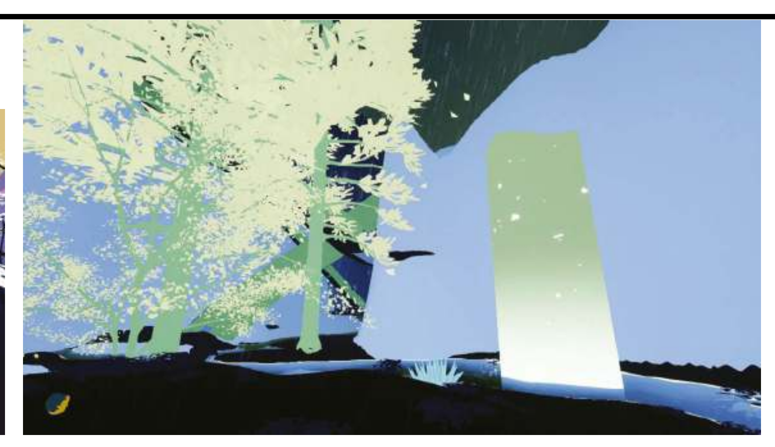
AN IMAGINATIVE SURVIVAL GAME WITH HEART





Above: Things start with a calm if foreboding opening where you can get a feel for the world and characters before you're plunged into a fight for your life. It's brief but important, giving the game real heart.





Above: Walking through the triangular arches, which act as the game's only definable objectives, changes the world state, switching the colour palette completely and often revealing new interactive objects to progress.

IT MAKES YOU WANDER

Shape Of The World

We'll give *Shape Of The World* this; we felt a hell of a lot more relaxed after playing it and since it was our go-to game over E3 week, that was no mean feat. What it offers beyond being the gaming equivalent of a foot massage we're hard pressed to tell you as it's a pretty light and featureless experience. There's something there though and that's thanks in large part to its most artistically expressive elements really excelling and immersing you in the game's vision.

We rarely kick off talking about the soundtrack of a game, but here we are doing it anyway, because *Shape Of The World* has a wonderfully etherial and floaty score that does most of the heavy lifting in terms of establishing a tone for the game world. The sci-fi exploration feel of so much of the game comes from the audio experience and how it surrounds you with long, bellowing notes and small chirps of activity. The entire soundscape at play offers the detail and texture that the game otherwise lacks visually. It brings life to otherwise lifeless areas of the game and that's to be commended.

The score has to work that hard because graphically *Shape Of The World* strives for the most stripped-back and simplified look it can do without losing all detail entirely. That's not to say that the game is visually bland, however, as it achieves a great deal with very little, embellished by the regular palette swaps you activate by walking through triangular doorways in the world, revealing new interactive elements as you do so. The often bright and vibrant colour scheme of the world, combined with the atmosphere the music evokes are what makes this game quite relaxing and engaging. It all begins to falter when the drive of the experience is examined though.

Like any good walking simulator, it always gives you something to walk towards, in this case floating triangular shapes that promise doorways to walk through and reveal new paths. You're climbing up a mountain because it's what's in front of you, and that's fine, but getting there is slow going. Not least because the walking speed is like walking through sludge a lot of the time. This is only made more apparent when you step on to one of the game's rollercoaster staircases where you speed up as you travel. Likewise, even swimming in water appears to be faster than walking. And in terms of interactivity, while tapping rocks to reveal paths and throwing seeds to instantly grow trees has its charms, it's all a little empty and loose. There's very little sense of a lived-in world or revealing narrative. There's just the journey up the mountain and that, ultimately, feels quite anticlimactic.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Hollow Tree Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £13.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SHELTER 2



WORSE THAN



JOURNEY

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

END GAME: Shape Of The World doesn't take long to finish, but when you get there it ends pretty flatly. We weren't expecting life-changing revelations, but it's a rather limp way to round off the experience.



BRIGHT, INTRIGUING, BUT LACKING DEPTH



Below: Pretty much any still image from the Shape Of The World looks like a composed picture. The mixture of stark colour with the texture of the plants, trees and strange creatures that roam around gives the game a lot of life.



A FRANTIC, FUN DASH

Onrush

Onrush has a simple goal: to provide racing action that is entertaining above anything else. And boy, does it deliver on that goal. To hell with nuanced tactics or set-ups, realistic physics a deep story, or even the basic concept of finishing at the front. In fact, *Onrush* isn't strictly speaking a racer. It's a chaser or, to quote Ludacris himself: "We're talking vehicular warfare."

Instead of racing to finish first around any of the dozen or so multi-route tracks, the goal here is to collect 'Boost' and 'Rush' points by driving with style, performing flips and tricks on any of each track's numerous jumps and, most importantly, taking out the opponents with high-speed takedowns, either knocking them out by slamming into them, forcing them off the track or – and this is our favourite method – timing and placing your jumps so that you crush them on landing. There are four main game modes, each one offering a special appeal to different types of drivers; Overdrive, in which you hammer the boost and rush buttons – and the opponents – to win; Countdown, a good ol' fashioned checkpoint race; Lockdown, where you have to win control of a fast-moving zone and Switch, the most innovative of the four modes. In Switch, each wreck shifts you on to a bigger vehicle, but each switch costs a 'life', which creates an intriguing tug-of-war between defensive driving and full-on aggression. All four modes pit teams of six against each other, so each features an element of teamwork on top of the general vehicular mayhem.

For newcomers, as well as those with experience of vehicular combat games such as *Carmageddon*, Overdrive and Countdown will be the most comfortable game modes. Both offer a refreshingly simple, full-throttle, finger-surgically-attached-to-the-trigger gameplay that you can jump into without much thought or preparation at all. Lockdown is perhaps the most team-focused, where you have to outnumber the opponent in a moving zone along the track – all the while whacking into any opponent nearby, but even then, your

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Codemasters
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED



WORSE THAN



MICRO MACHINES



Above: As the battle progresses, you will be able to track your individual progress within your team in the race for the MVP award, but do keep in mind you won't win it unless your team wins the match.

Below: Much like games such as *Fortnite*, your avatar will be the extension of your personality within the game, and through levelling up you will unlock new clothes, bike tricks and celebratory animations. You have a diverse gallery of options.

THE CAMERA ANGLES ARE FREQUENTLY SENSATIONAL, AND THE THRILL OF AN ESPECIALLY GOOD TAKEDOWN FEELS VISCERAL



FAQs

Q. SINGLE OR MULTIPLAYER?
Both work fine. The single-player missions are suitably varied, and the online arena is good for both groups and loners.

Q. ARE THERE NO WEAPONS?
It's not quite Mario Kart, but each vehicle does have 'weaponised' functions, such as a Rush 'blackout' for trailing drivers or enemy boost drains.

Q. BETTER TO LEAD OR TRAIL?
There's no prize for finishing first, and by staying closely behind you can max your takedowns. So trail. Definitely trail.

Below: The game pace is frantic and relentless, and only when you look back over some of your captures or videos will you notice the many details and surprising wealth of info being fed to you.



LOCK IT DOWN

Perhaps the most tactical game mode is Lockdown, and (along with Switch) is fairly innovative for a game like this. While the Overdrive and Countdown modes actively encourage indiscriminate mayhem, Lockdown focuses the action onto a single spot on the track, requiring (slightly) more careful driving, and tends to lead to fewer takedowns, as wild swerves and careless wrecks will lose you the zone being fought over. It may feel tamer to play, but the extra control needed to win this mode will serve you well in other modes, even if this may feel less entertaining in the moment. This is a mode best played once you're familiar with the tracks, as that will give you a definite edge here.

tactical muscles won't be stretched too far. And even when you wreck your vehicle – and this will happen several times in each five-to-ten-minute race – you won't have to worry about catching up with the opponent, as you will respawn in the thick of the action, already travelling at what seems like just a hair under the speed of light.

Although Switch does demand the tiniest bit of restraint, each mode rewards an aggressive style. The reward, both points-based and emotional, of wiping out an opponent far outweighs the cost of wrecking your own car, so even finesse drivers will be gleefully wrecking everything in sight within minutes. In addition, the sheer sense of velocity rivals anything we've recently played, and even though the first run-through of each track can be wildly disorientating, the obstacle-rich environment is still simple enough to master in a few attempts. The camera angles are frequently sensational, and the thrill of an especially good takedown feels visceral, briefly taking you out of the action only to launch you back into it at blistering speed.

Each vehicle has its own special features: the two bikes offer extra points for doing mid-jump tricks to outweigh how extremely vulnerable they are on the track, while the bigger trucks offer brute force and destructive power at the cost of reduced manoeuvrability. What becomes your favourite will depend heavily on your style, although the fact that the field is intentionally kept very tight will give an edge to size over nimbleness.

Everything in *Onrush* is designed for the thrill of the moment, and for instant individual gratification, even with the team element of each mode. In single-player mode you progress through increasingly complex – or rather diminishingly simplistic – missions, from tutorial-like start levels to short tournaments built around each mode. Even though the goal is always a win for your team, the focus is squarely on you, the individual. After each battle, an MVP is anointed, along with celebrating those with the most takedowns, gates passed, zones captured and so on. And the learning curve is not exactly steep; after a few of those, you'll be finding yourself taking the MVP award more often than not.

Each level-up, which come thick and fast during the early stages, unlocks new designs for your vehicles, new aerial bike tricks, new outfits for your avatar and new celebratory dance moves.

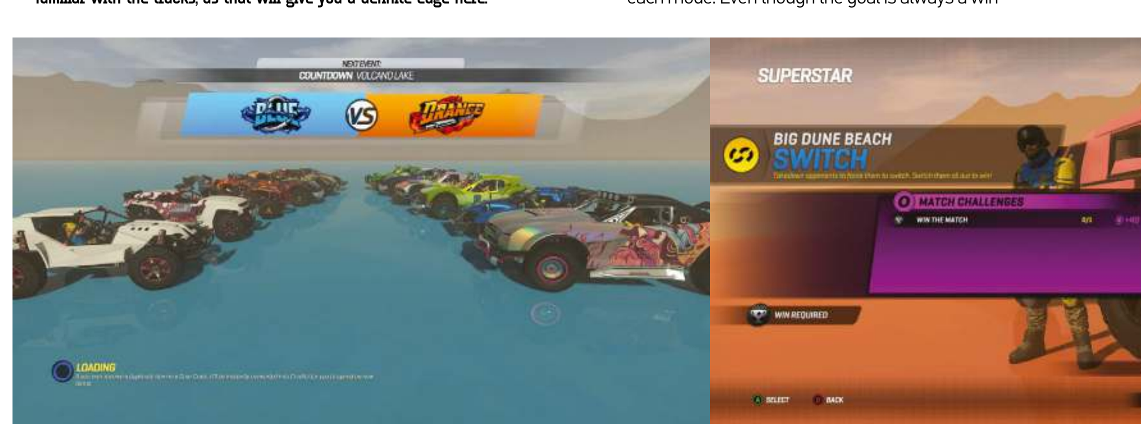
It was always going to be impossible to get through an entire review of *Onrush* without having to acknowledge its many similarities to team games like *Overwatch* and perhaps even *Fortnite*. The arena-style combat format, the cartoonish avatars, the ever-so-slightly but intentionally blocky visual world – although *Onrush*'s graphics probably balance performance and detail better than anything available on a console right now – and then there's the dancing. All of this is abundantly present in *Onrush*, only adding to the lingering sensation that you're playing *Carmageddon* for a new generation, an entirely blood-free, accessory-laden rampage on wheels. But, while occasionally annoying, it's not a big distraction. If the aesthetic feels simple, it's like that for a reason: speed. Not just processing speed, but speed of navigating too. *Onrush* is optimised for any player wanting to sit down, switch off and get a fast, adrenaline-filled dose of escapist release, be it for 15 minutes or three hours.

Through Codemasters' dedication to the many details underneath the simple, blocky exterior, *Onrush* ends up being much more than just *Overwatch* for petrolheads. It's an innovative resurrection of the arcade racer.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

CAREFUL NOW: Unlike racing sims, where one careless driver in an online race can ruin your entire evening, the arcade freedom of *Onrush* oddly makes for a much less stressed online experience.

VERDICT 8/10
SIMPLE BUT VERY ENTERTAINING



YOU CANNOT BE SERIOUS

Mario Tennis Aces

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Camelot Software Planning
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

We had genuinely high hopes for *Mario Tennis Aces.* Perhaps higher than would seem reasonable for an arcade tennis game, but given the heritage of this series, it didn't seem so outlandish to think this could be something special. It had all of the makings of another must-play multiplayer hit on the Switch, but somewhere in there it just over-complicated itself.

The targets of our ire this time around are the focus and special shots, which have essentially replaced the ultra smashes from the WiiU release, and are just as annoying. Now, special shots have been a feature of the series for some time, and while they have always been overpowered, they were at least fun and unique to each player. They could kill a game, but they didn't feel entirely unfair so long as you read their movement and positioned yourself well. Camelot Software has attempted to create some balance to their use allowing you to return them if you time your shot just right, but the give and take of using your own power meter to slow down time and get your return just right (not to mention just working out what direction it's heading in) just doesn't work.

We had hoped that the Adventure Mode would offer a respite from the frustrations of tournament and solo play, but while it certainly offers a lot of variety and fun mechanics, it also has its frustrations when it leans into the weakest element of the game: those special shots. *Mario Tennis Aces* mixes these up well, making the solo action feel far more engaged and often challenging than you might expect. But then there are challenges that require the use of a focus shot to hit your target, and the inconsistency of the hit boxes for these shots became infuriating in a brand new way.

And the return of the on-court stars, now used for star shots that give your chosen return a little extra oomph, strip the skill out of the game just as they did before. They tell you exactly where the ball is about to land and appear on the court too often. They are also now seemingly universal shot enhancers, while they were shot-specific last time out.

Mario Tennis on WiiU was a bit of a stodgy mess, and *Mario Tennis Aces* had looked broader and more varied in its offering, integrating something close to fighter mechanics in some ways. In terms of game modes it certainly improves on things, but the mechanics of the game are just as arbitrary now as then. Each player has a unique feel up to a point, but the focus and special shots strip them of personality and decimate any kind of skill the game might otherwise have required. We were hoping for so much more.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STRIP IT BACK: Frankly, Mario's sporting outings have been getting lost in gimmicky mechanics for too long. The anthology releases for the Olympics tend to work a little better, in part because they have to be simpler. This is a bit of a mess.

BETTER THAN: MARIO TENNIS: ULTRA SMASH

WORSE THAN: MARIO TENNIS: POWER TOUR



Above: There's a lot more court variety to enjoy in this game than the previous outing on WiiU, with each court type producing different reactions from the ball as it bounces. Court type can really play into the strengths of certain characters.





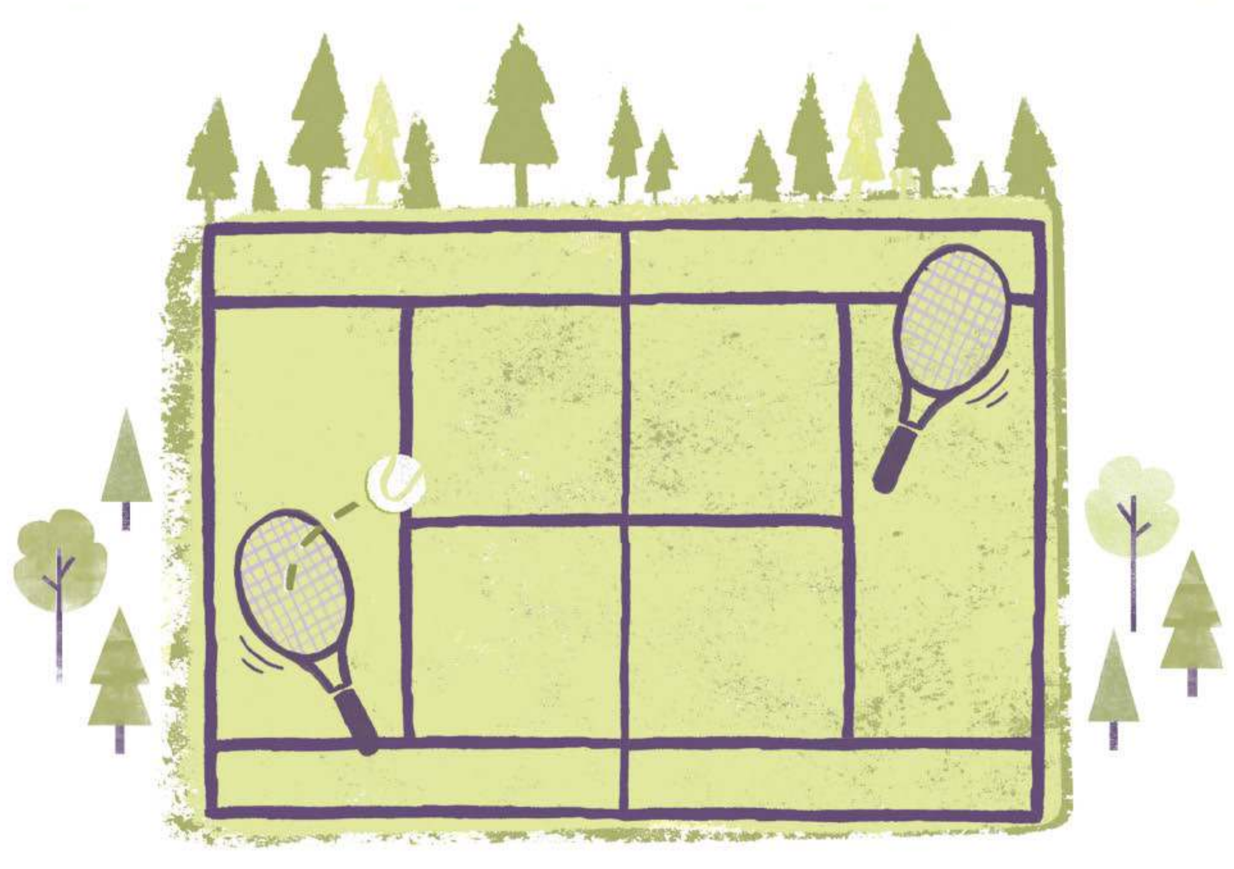
Above: While the build-up to everyone's special shot is different, the targeted shot placement is the same, and it's always about power. The unique character-specific specials of the past have been lost, and that's a shame.



IMPROVED VARIETY, BUT GIMMICKY GAMEPLAY

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Love magazines? You'll love them even more knowing they're made from natural, renewable and recyclable wood.

UNFAO, Global Forest Resources Assessment 2005-2015

A CRIME AGAINST YOUR CONTROLLER

Milanoir

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One, Switch
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: Good Shepherd Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Italo Games
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

We've bested *Bloodborne*, aced every level in *Hotline Miami* on the way to the *Platinum Trophy* and conquered the notoriously tough *Super Meat Boy*, but even we were forced to concede defeat when faced with our toughest challenge yet: wrestling with *Milanoir*'s terrible controls.

An action game inspired by 1970's Italian crime films, *Milanoir* puts you in the shoes of a violent mafia hitman. Shooting sections where you fight against the henchmen of rival mob bosses are interspersed with boat and car chases, boss battles on subway trains, ambushes where vans try to run you down, and even a stint in prison.

Milanoir evidentially wants to position itself in the tradition of games that draw much of their appeal from their challenge, such as the aforementioned *Bloodborne* and *Super Meat Boy.* The problem is that its challenge does not come from smart design, or the sophistication of its AI – buffoonish enemies will sometimes stand still and shoot at you while you're out of range, or walk in the opposite direction even though they are brandishing melee weapons. It comes from the fact that you are always fighting against its control system, corralling the target reticule to the location you want it to get to as if herding an unruly animal. You never get any sense that you are learning from your failures, slowly finding your way around systems that will reward you in the long run. You simply resent the fact that you are confronted with controls that make the game maddeningly frustrating to play. Playing with a mouse on PC, perhaps *Milanoir* works. But with a controller, on PS4, we couldn't find a combination of sensitivity settings that made it anything but hellish.



Above: The game's temperamental auto lock-on targeting system can be as much of a hinderance as it is a help, dragging your cursor in unexpected directions.



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

RUTHLESS RICOCHETS: Shooting different shaped street signs for different kinds of quick ricochet kills is a nice idea. It can be a bit difficult to spot them in the heat of battle, however.

BETTER THAN — ORC SLAYER

WORSE THAN — BROFORCE

It's a real shame the shooting is so poor, because there are positives. The game's pixel-art is fantastic and we like its structure in principal. Frequent switches between standard shooting sections, boss battles and chases to give it a sense of momentum and variety. It uses quick narrative scenes to tell its story, occasionally displaying flashes of flair and the odd interesting idea. Even that praise must come with a caveat, however. The odd stylish or creative storytelling flourish is not representative of a coherent approach. It's not clear to what degree this game thinks it's a parody or a homage, to what degree it wants you to take it at face value. This lack of tonal clarity can be off-putting, particularly during one key narrative moment that comes off as incredibly tasteless.

Ultimately, it's really not worth wringing our hands over the value of including that somewhat crass scene, because for everything good and bad this game does, there's no escaping the fundamental problem that overshadows everything else: it is a shooter with terrible shooting.

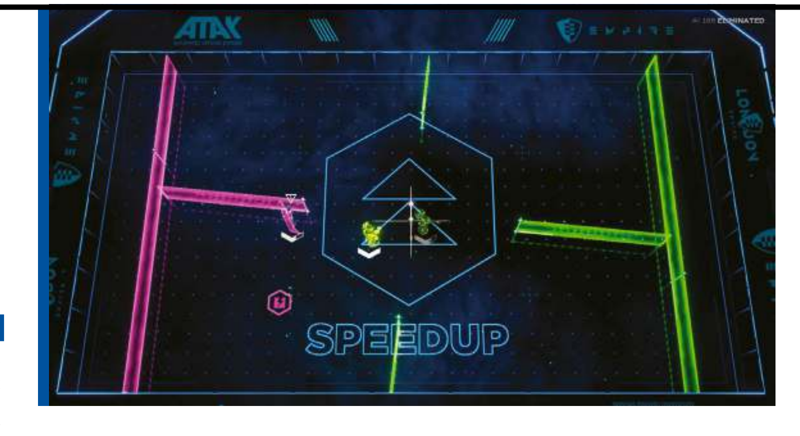


Above: Molotov cocktails will get thrown your way, but at least you can pick some up and throw them back in the other direction now and again.



VERDICT 3/10

AWFUL CONTROLS OVERSHADOW EVERYTHING



GLADIATORS, READY

Laser League

Few saw this coming. Indie studio Roll7 has an impressive pedigree, winning a BAFTA for its *OlliOlli* skateboarding game and plaudits for 2015's gag-filled *Not a Hero*. But an immediately accessible, teamwork-essential, dazzlingly original esports hit in waiting? Nah. Nobody could have called that a couple of years ago.

But that's precisely what *Laser League* is – or, rather, what it could be. Right now, the game's still evolving, with spaces for new arenas and player classes to be added to the mix. And its current user numbers aren't terrific either, with long matchmaking times experienced on PS4 – though that's less of an issue for Xbox One owners, where *Laser League* is on the Game Pass program.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves – let's take a moment to explain the essentials. *Laser League* is a future-set sports game, where two teams of between one and four players (twos and threes only for online play) compete against one another in a rectangular arena to eliminate the opposition. Those who are left standing win the game – best of three games per round, best of three rounds per match. Simple.

And how the losers wind up defeated is elementary, too. Each team wears a certain (gloriously bright) colour, and lasers that spread across the arena correspond to one of the two, depending on who activates them. Your avatar can pass through their lasers – but is eliminated when they touch the other team's impenetrable beams. Players can be revived by teammates – just run over where they fell – and can also warp from one wall to its opposite side via teleportation-like 'wrapping' (think Pac-Man chomping off to the right only to reappear on the left).

That's the basics – but once you stir in a variety of player classes, ranging from aggressive attack-orientated options to more defensively minded loadouts, tide-turning power-up items, and each arena's wildly different laser patterns, *Laser League* becomes a whole lot more strategic. Teams must turn out with complementary player classes – a full squad of blade-wielders is unlikely to beat opponents with a more balanced team sheet. As the matches become increasingly hectic, with walls of instant-KO neon everywhere, so effective communication matters all the more.

Playing locally, with friendly co-op partners beside you, is the ideal way to experience *Laser League*. The game demands familiarity between its futuristic athletes if they're to succeed. Played online with strangers the game's not quite so arresting, but remains a compelling proposition, capable of emergent drama as assumed underdogs claw it back, and sudden-death match points ratchet up the tension to hardly bearable levels.

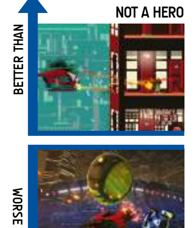
Roll7 have delivered a game with the potential to be a proper esports contender. All *Laser League* needs is enough players to propel it to the heights it deserves.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TRON'S LEGACY: There's no denying that Laser League borrows an aesthetic trick or two from Disney's neon-soaked Tron movies, but that impression's only skin deep as there's lots of originality here.

DETAILS
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: 505 Games
DEVELOPER: Roll7
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6 online, 1-8 offline
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN — NOT A HERO

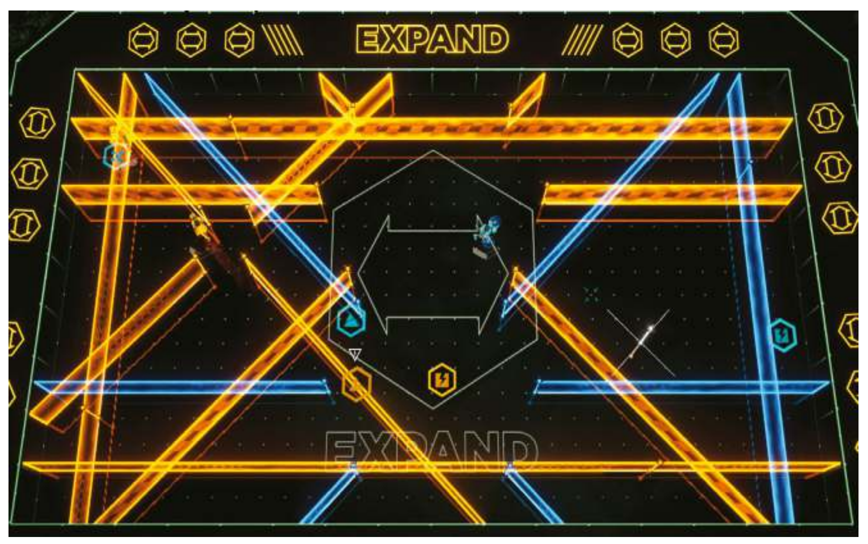


WORSE THAN — ROCKET LEAGUE





VERDICT 9/10
AN ESPORTS-READY SUCCESS NEEDING A SIZEABLE AUDIENCE





Above: With users thin on the ground on PS4, don't be surprised to face-off against a fair few bots
Right: Laser League clicks after a single match – reveals itself to be a multiplayer game of great depth.

SLAYIN' AND SELLIN'

Moonlighter





Above: *Moonlighter* boasts beautiful pixel art and animation that'll stand the test of time, just like the five main dungeons you'll be plundering numerously and extensively.

It's difficult to say no to a title that packs in so much. As the name of white haired protagonist Will's shop, but also an accurate description of his various professions, *Moonlighter* is a multi-layered title, but how does it fair under the microscope?

Running the shop in-game requires setting fair but profitable prices and keeping your wares well stocked. This necessitates the player venturing into one of five dungeons on the outskirts of town. It's reminiscent of *Recettear* but with several necessary, streamlining updates. As shop owner and adventurer, you're cutting out the middleman for starters. Unfortunately that does also mean that when this roguelite gets its claws out, the buck stops with you.

As you plunder the depths of a dungeon, you'll have to contend with item management just as much as the monsters. Your pack is purposefully strapped for space, encouraging you to be selective in what you bring home (especially as you encounter cursed items that can damage other parts of your stock upon your return). You'll be whacking dungeon dwellers, learning the attack patterns of each and adapting; managing your pack and using your hard earned gold to upgrade your equipment or store. You'll be quickly drawn in and happily sink hours into it, always striving to be strong enough to breach the next boss chamber. There's a satisfying gameplay loop to be found during the facets of *Moonlighter's* gameplay.

Even the lowliest of dungeon denizens can put you in a tight spot if you're not careful. When you die only the items on your person can return with you to town though, thankfully, your gold will remain largely untouched. Death is still a setback but it's pitched just right to draw you straight back in.

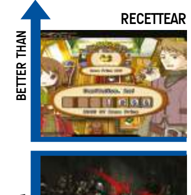
While there are plenty of opportunities to heal in dungeons, from potions to pleasant pools you occasionally find, you can't heal during a majority of combat rooms, which makes boss fights uniquely challenging. With a button dedicated to warping out of a bad situation for a small sum of gold, deaths seldom feel cheap. That said, due to some bizarre quirks of the procedural dungeon generation and enemy spawn locations, they still can do occasionally. For example, at least one enemy type can only be damaged by striking their exposed back so, naturally, they spawn up against a wall or in a corner. And of course they're reluctant, rightly so, to move away from these safe havens.

But *Moonlighter* builds good will, even in the face of some of its design choices. The grind from lowly dungeoneer and shopkeeper to an adventurer in your own right is enjoyable and, thanks to the gorgeous pixel art, you won't want to take your eyes off it. You'll definitely find yourself returning to this dungeon to expand your shop and get that little bit further every time.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: 11 bit studios
DEVELOPER: Digital Sun
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — RECETTEAR



WORSE THAN — DARKEST DUNGEON



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

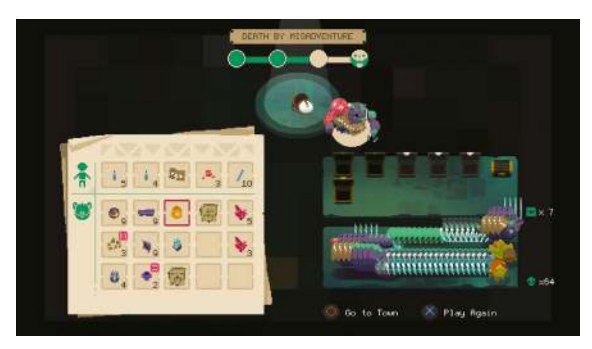
REMEMBER ME: Reminiscent of *Recettear*, *Moonlighter* gives you far more options as a savvy peddler and boasts beautiful pixel art to boot.

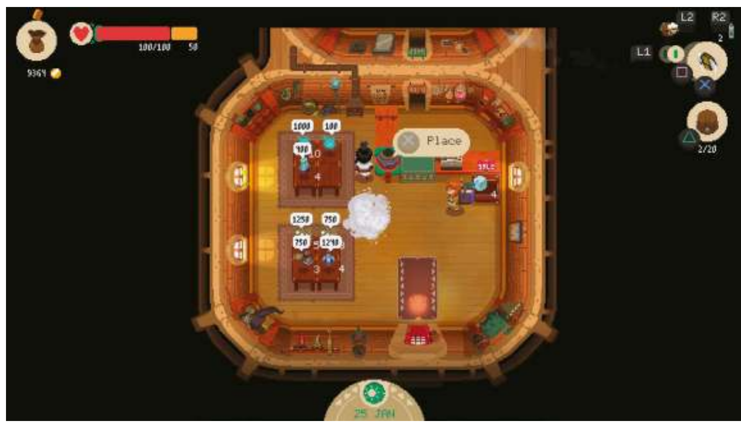


VERDICT 8/10

TAKES CARE OF BUSINESS AND LOOKS GOOD

Below: For a lot of enemies the key to success is paying attention and pattern memorisation. The same is true of bosses but their expanded health pool and your inability to heal during these encounters makes for another level of challenge.





DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: ARTEfr
DEVELOPER: Darjeeling Productions
PRICE: £2.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

THE HUMAN BODY REIMAGINED

Homo Machina

Homo Machina hits all the criteria of an intriguing demo, artfully exhibiting the fusion of stunning art and simple puzzles. Regrettably, it fails to offer a well-rounded experience, leaving us feeling dissatisfied with the final product.

Recreating the human body in the style of a 1920s factory, this modest collection of puzzles whisks us through everyday bodily functions. Darjeeling Productions has opted for a style that masterfully avoids all the pitfalls that could have made us feel a bit squeamish; replacing the complex structure of the human eye with camera components and the nervous system with a simplified electrical grid.

Reflective of the multitude of unique processes that our bodies undergo, *Homo Machina*'s mechanics retain a freshness throughout. While the puzzles are not overly complicated, it's clear to see that each one has been meticulously crafted with specific regions of the body in mind. Nonetheless, the absence of a tutorial left us unsure of the best way to proceed early on. It was refreshing to encounter a game that doesn't linger on a lengthy introduction, yet the lack of guidance coupled with bugs that left the screen unresponsive caused us to feel disengaged all too quickly. Further bugs required us to restart the game often, artificially prolonging our time with an already surprisingly short title.

Homo Machina also has little replay value. While it's precariously teetering on the verge of being 'too short', its attractive visuals and chirpy soundtrack attempt to justify its price tag. Heavily inspired by the work of the physician, Fritz Kahn, this title successfully expands on the depictions outlined in 'Der Mensch als Industriepalast'. Despite its admirable combination of pleasing visuals, quirky characters and whimsical music, it's clear that the developer has concentrated on a brief yet beautiful experience, rather than delivering a substantial volume of content. Prioritising quality over quantity is something we can certainly get behind but, with the wealth of high calibre games of similar monetary value on the mobile platform, do not feel rushed to play this one.


Right: A glimpse of the human body, reimagined as a 1920s-style factory. Keeping things ticking over may be a challenge.

BETTER THAN


MEKORAMA

WORSE THAN


MONUMENT VALLEY

VERDICT 5/10
A STUNNING, FLEETING EXPERIENCE BETRAYED BY BUGS

A 16-BIT HIT?

Fox n Forests

Paying tribute to 2D platformers of the 16-Bit era, _Fox n Forests_ is a challenging adventure with a seasonal twist. Traversing forests teeming with bizarre enemies, we play as Rick, a sharp-shooting fox burdened with the task of taking down a mystical force intent on establishing a deadly fifth season.

Showcasing detailed pixel art and lingering chiptunes, *Fox n Forests*' achieves a familiar aesthetic, tastefully revisiting this classic take on the genre while incorporating features that attempt to improve on it. While these alterations have good intentions, they fall short in a number of areas. Changing seasons on the fly adds an additional layer to each level, encouraging us to interact with obstructions differently while gaining access to otherwise hidden areas and items. However, due to the excessive repetition of similar enemies and obstructions throughout the game's lengthy levels, this mechanic rapidly loses its charm. Thankfully the 'Bonus' levels employ rapid season-switching in order to beat bosses, making this mechanic feel more integral to the experience and more satisfying.

Rather than offer a great number of short levels, *Fox n Forests* opts for a small selection of long levels. This amounts to just four levels per world, with four worlds in total. Don't be fooled into thinking you can just rush down the game, though. Moving from one world to another depends on you collecting magical seeds and this requirement had us backtracking across the first three levels almost immediately. Restricting progress so early on and forcing us to replay levels that we had just finished feels quite discouraging, particularly when many of the character upgrades are relatively expensive.

Bonus Level Entertainment has created a 2D platformer that looks as though it fits with classic 16-Bit titles, yet it failed to sustain our attention for long. Although it strives to include interesting mechanics, the game's long levels and progression restrictions don't feel particularly welcoming. It's difficult to create a 16-Bit platformer that truly stands out and this one doesn't do enough to take on existing gems in the genre.

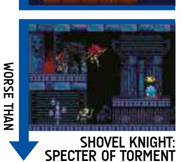
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: EuroVideo
DEVELOPER: Bonus Level Entertainment
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN


DRAGON'S LAIR

WORSE THAN


SHOVEL KNIGHT: SPECTER OF TORMENT


Switch seasons at the touch of a button. Defeating bosses will depend on carefully-timed attacks, utilising each season to your advantage.

VERDICT 5/10
CAPTURES THE 16-BIT FEEL, BUT FALLS SHORT

SPIN ME RIGHT 'ROUND, BABY, RIGHT 'ROUND

Quarantine Circular



There are no gun fights in *Quarantine Circular*. No car chases, no quicktime prompts. Though there are a couple of puzzle-esque moments (and we even use the word "puzzle" in the very loosest sense of the word), don't expect complex mechanics or collectibles, either. *Quarantine Circular* is a long conversation. Yes, it dovetails into broader issues – empathy, compassion, understanding, acceptance – but essentially, *Quarantine Circular* is a long discussion in which you must consider not just what you say, but *how* you say it.

Quarantine – the latest in Mike Bithell's series of short games – is a text-based narrative adventure, but that's where the similarities with its predecessor, *Subsurface Circular*, end (so no, you don't need to have played the first game to make sense of this one). Whilst humanity grapples with a devastating plague, a visitor from another planet – nicknamed Gabriel, as they like their angelic namesakes – unexpectedly turns up on the International Disease Containment Fleet (IDCF). Unclear if it's coincidence or something more sinister, the crew aboard take steps to contain Gabe until they can figure out if they're friend or foe.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Bithell Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, 2.5 GHz, 8 GB RAM, 2GB Graphic Card, 3 GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Unlike its predecessor, in *Quarantine* your viewpoint isn't narrowed to a single perspective, and you'll move – sometimes with little warning – between the heads of several characters, each with their own unique thoughts, opinions, and agendas. Unlike traditional RPGs as we've come to know them – those big sprawling stories that offer a wide range of expansive, meaningful decisions – in *Quarantine* your character's dialogue options rarely deviate from their own agenda, even if it's a position that the player doesn't entirely agree with.

FINGERPRINT

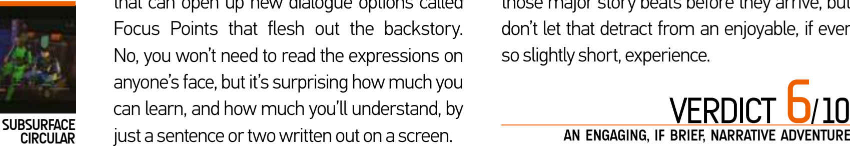
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TEXTASTIC: Despite simple graphics, minimal animations, and a limited cast that you'll never see beneath their suits and helmets, *Quarantine Circular* delivers an engaging story through text alone.

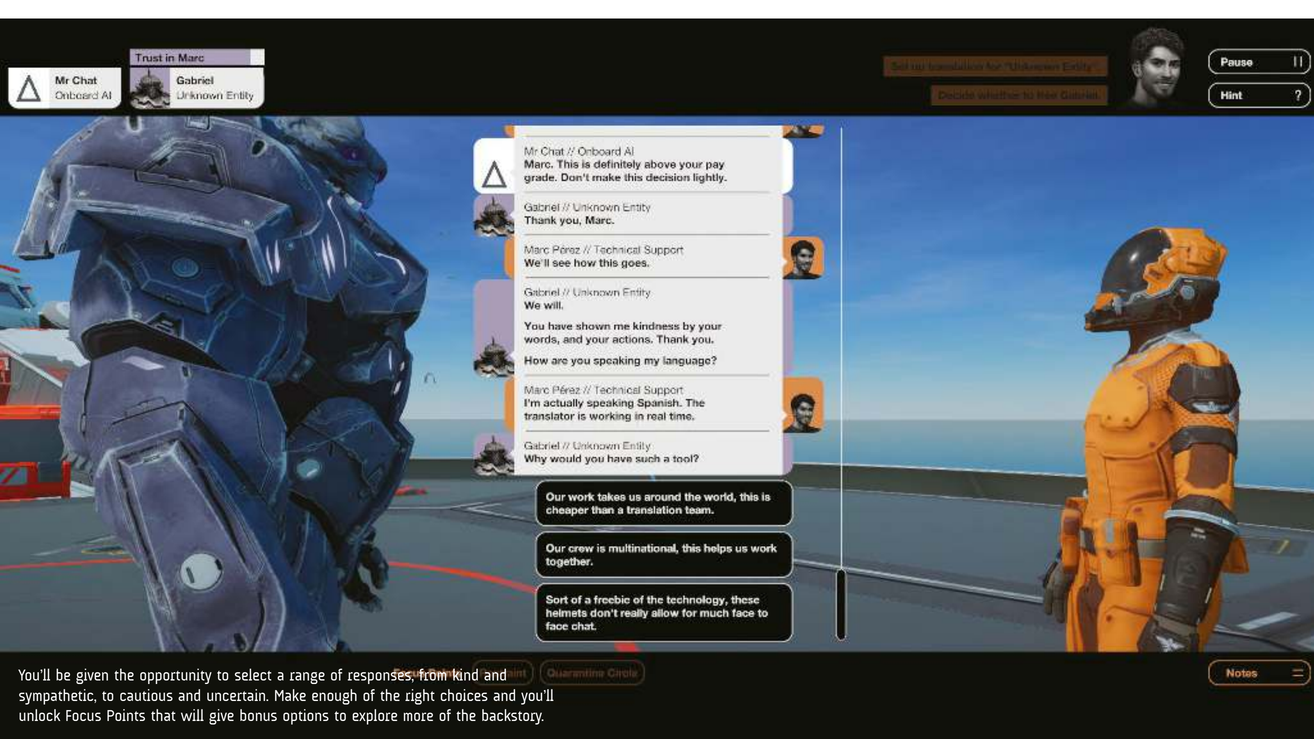
You will get some agency in what happens however. There are measures to earn trust from others, for example, opportunities to ensure your squad feels valued and appreciated that can open up new dialogue options called Focus Points that flesh out the backstory. No, you won't need to read the expressions on anyone's face, but it's surprising how much you can learn, and how much you'll understand, by just a sentence or two written out on a screen.

Quarantine Circular is not an overly long journey. It likely won't last you more than a couple of hours, but there remains a strong compulsion to jump back in and replay it in alternate ways to trigger different outcomes. But while there are six endings to discover, most feel oddly abrupt and surprisingly anticlimactic, especially given *Quarantine Circular's* hitherto careful pacing. It can feel as though plenty of those differing dialogue branches always seem to end up in the exact same place anyway.

Having said that It is rather thoughtful, and it is wonderfully accessible, with enough self-awareness to tell a mature tale that isn't afraid to lighten serious segments with humorous relief. Sure, you might see some of those major story beats before they arrive, but don't let that detract from an enjoyable, if ever so slightly short, experience.



VERDICT 6/10
AN ENGAGING, IF BRIEF, NARRATIVE ADVENTURE



You'll be given the opportunity to select a range of responses, from kind and sympathetic, to cautious and uncertain. Make enough of the right choices and you'll unlock Focus Points that will give bonus options to explore more of the backstory.



“I only had a cover disc demo, but it was such a hard game I never reached the end of it”

REX CROWLE, CO-FOUNDER, FOAM SWORD



WHY I ♥...

EXILE

REX CROWLE
CO-FOUNDER, FOAM SWORD

"There are a lot of games that I love, particularly those that have a great visual style, but actually the number one for me is a really old game that I don't know if that many people have heard of; it's called Exile, *where you play as a little spaceman on a planet.*

And, to be honest, I never really had the full game. I only had a cover disc demo, but it was such a hard game I never reached the end of it. It was a really early 2D physics game and it just had an incredible atmosphere of really feeling like you were fighting against the weather systems and the gravity of this alien planet. Trying to navigate with your little jetpack and throwing these bombs around that had physics, it all had a very emergent quality, which I hadn't really experienced in games up until that point. I just spent ages trying to throw grenades through very strong gravity to get to where I wanted them to go. It blew my mind when I realised they could actually go through teleporters and come out the other side and still maintain the same trajectory. It's a similar feeling to what we've been trying to get with some of our mechanics [in Knights & Bikes*]; you could spend the rest of your life just trying to throw grenades at birds and that's exactly what we're going for."*

RETRO

NO.202

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO… SEGA ARCADE GAMES

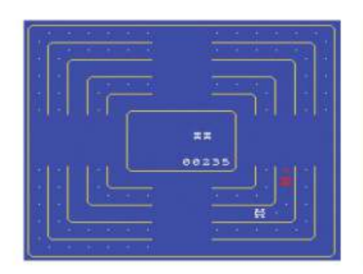
Sega, like many Japanese developers, first made its name in your local arcade. **games™** looks back at key 2D hits from the esteemed publisher

CHANCES ARE IF YOU saw a technically astonishing game in your local arcade during the Eighties and Nineties, it was probably by Sega. While it would later go on to battle Nintendo and Atari in the home market, Sega's first introduction to gamers was as an arcade manufacturer. It first started making electrical mechanical games like *Motopolo*, *Periscope* and *Missile* as early as the late Sixties, before moving into videogames like so many of its peers.

While Sega was happy to copy whatever was popular at the time (as many other developers did), it wasn't afraid to innovate either, releasing games like *Heavyweight Champ*, considered by many to be one of the first one-on-one fighting games, or pushing ahead technically with releases like *Turbo*.

Sega really began to hit its stride during the Eighties and Nineties, mainly thanks to Yu Suzuki who, along with his talented team at Sega-AM2, released countless critically acclaimed games, including *Space Harrier*, *OutRun*, *Virtua Fighter*, *Daytona USA*, *Virtua Cop* and many others. Suzuki's team not only revolutionised racing games with its 'Super Scaler' technology, but also introduced the first 3D polygon arcade fighting game and other firsts.

The power of Sega's Model series arcade boards are a story for another issue, however, as the sheer breadth and scale of Sega's output means it would be impossible to cover all of its output here. With that in mind, here are some of the very best of its 2D games. How many did you play?





HEAD ON

1979

While *Pac-Man* is generally considered to be the first maze-based pill muncher, Sega's *Head On* actually beat Namco's iconic mascot by coming out a year earlier.

Taking control of a basic-looking race car, the aim is to drive around the simply constructed maze, collecting all the dots as you go. An opponent (typically controlled by AI) is doing the exact same thing, but moves in the opposite direction, meaning you have to switch between the available lanes to avoid a nasty crash.

It proved popular for Sega, leading to several clones, including Konami's *Fast Lane*, which arrived in 1987 with significantly upgraded aesthetics and gameplay mechanics.

BORDERLINE

1980

This inventive little shooter certainly entertains across its four distinctive stages. Some take the form of overhead shooters, where you must drive your jeep behind enemy lines, destroying enemies as you go, while other levels have you moving through underbrush and creating tunnels that enemies can then follow you through. It's a neat idea that makes us wonder if *Dig Dug*'s creator ever played it. A port was eventually created by Sega for its SG-1000 in 1983.

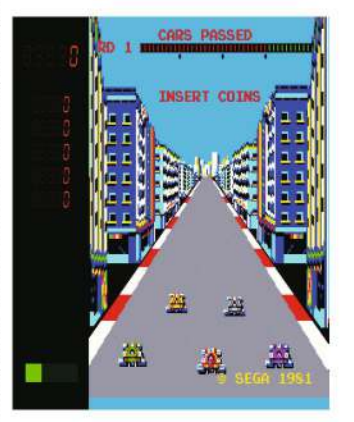


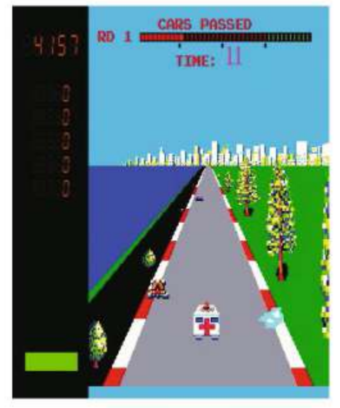
CARNIVAL

1980

This strategic shooter is notable for being one of the earliest arcade games to have a bonus round. The main stage requires you to hit as many high-scoring targets as you can with limited bullets. You then move to the bonus stage, which requires you to shoot a bear as many times as possible before it ambles off the screen.







TURBO

1981

This impressive racer arguably set numerous firsts for the popular arcade racing games that would follow in its wake. It features racing through both urban and rural environments, changing weather conditions and hazards to avoid, as well as different landscapes, hills and much more. It's a frantic race against time as you attempt to overtake 30 other racers, and was eventually ported to the ColecoVision and Intellivision.





ALI BABA AND THE 40 THIEVES

1982

This interesting *Pac-Man* clone is unusual, as you're typically the most dangerous character in the maze. The aim is to protect your gold from being stolen by the 40 thieves, and you can see many of them off by simply running over them. Only the red thief is impervious, unless you grab one of the power-ups that expands you in size and lets you crush him. Lives are lost by being caught by the red thief or losing all your gold, while you'll complete a stage by destroying all 40 thieves.

PENGO
1982



Pengo the penguin is on a mission, and that involves destroying as many Sno-Bees as penguinly possible. Although he's vastly outnumbered, Pengo is a versatile little fellow, and can kill his adversaries in a number of different ways, including crushing blocks that contain unhatched Sno-Bees and squashing them between multiple blocks that he's slid towards them. If the Sno-Bees are still alive after two minutes (and Pengo hasn't lost a life), the fearsome foes will transform into Blobs and attempt to exit the stage.

The original release of Coreland's game featured a version of Gershon Kingsley's 'Popcorn', but this was later removed. Its popularity meant it was converted to numerous Atari systems, including the Atari 2600.





ZAXXON
1982

While it obviously takes influence from Konami's *Scramble*, Sega's take on the shoot-'em-up pushes the idea far further. Graphically it remains excellent, with a striking isometric viewpoint (it was the first arcade game to feature axonometric projection) that still impresses today. It's also possible to alter the height of your ship, allowing you to move over parts of the treacherous landscape as you shoot your way to victory. Immensely popular at the time of its release (it was the first videogame to be advertised on television), Sega's game was converted to numerous systems at the time, and received several sequels.

CONGO BONGO
1983



Nintendo's success with *Donkey Kong* led to Sega creating its own simian-based platform game. Set across four distinctive levels, *Congo Bongo* requires you to get revenge on Bongo after he sets your tent alight in a charming opening cut scene. First, though, you must dodge the coconuts he throws at you, traverse a snake-filled swamp by hitching a ride on the back of a friendly hippo, and use holes to avoid a herd of stampeding rhinos. Successfully complete all four stages, and you'll play your own prank on the great ape and replay the game on a higher difficulty setting.





UP'N DOWN
1983

Sega continued its isometric assault with this entertaining maze game that shares elements with Namco's *Rally-X*. As with Namco's game, the aim is to collect a set amount of flags, but here you can destroy enemies by leaping over them. It's also possible to jump gaps in the track, although you'll need to get the timing just right. Tough, but very satisfying.





FLICKY
1984

Help Flicky guide a bunch of cute Chirps to safety before they fall prey to marauding cats. The tiny birds are scattered across the playing field, and will dutifully follow Flicky once she moves past them. While Flicky can't fly, she is able to fend off enemies with a variety of household items. It was converted to numerous systems, including the Mega Drive.

SPACE HARRIER
1986

Although *Hang-On* was the first game to use 'Super Scaler' technology, Yu Suzuki's *Space Harrier* was the first to highlight just how impressive the technology could be. Originally planned as a military jet shooter, Yu Suzuki decided to use a new fantasy setting when he realised the hardware wasn't quite up to the task. The end result is an incredible on-rails shooter that boasts hypnotically fast levels, challenging enemy waves and some spectacular-looking bosses. Notable for its wonderful music, iconic voice samples and a deluxe version that featured a gigantic hydraulic chair, *Space Harrier*'s success meant it was ported to countless home systems. Few of them were able to capture the giddying excitement of the original, though.








OUTRUN

1986

Originally inspired by the movie, *The Cannonball Run*, Yu Suzuki changed his mind when he realised just how empty the roads of America were. He instead headed to Europe, and the end result was *OutRun*, one of the most impressive racers of the Eighties thanks to its stunning visuals, gorgeous soundtrack and multiple routes that resulted in five distinct endings. Yu Suzuki's game continued to build on Sega's 'Super Scaler' technology, and proved a hot property on home computers, too. Sadly, all of US Gold's ports were largely terrible, failing to capture the speed and excitement of the arcade original. Numerous sequels and spin-offs have appeared over the years, with the most recent being a 3D update for Nintendo's 3DS.

WONDER BOY

1986

Escape's slick platformer was a big hit for Sega, spawning countless sequels and an alternate series called *Adventure Island* on Nintendo systems. It's a fast-paced platformer, with Wonder Boy constantly grabbing fruit in order to top up his dwindling vitality bar.





ALIEN SYNDROME

1987

Sega's top-down shooter has elements of *Gauntlet*, but is clearly inspired by Ridley Scott's *Alien*. Each stage is crawling with gloopy-looking aliens, and can be completed by rescuing a set amount of your comrades and defeating the level's gruesome guardian.




SHINOBI

1987

While it's clearly inspired by Namco's *Rolling Thunder*, Sega's arcade game is very much its own creation thanks to a strong ninja theme, stylish presentation (each level takes the form of a briefing) and some unusual bosses that range from giant samurai to attack helicopters. It's memorable for an excellent bonus round that sees you trying to mow down countless ninja before they can land in front of you, and some excellent tunes. It was ported to numerous home systems at the time, and turned into a solid franchise for Sega, with the last game, *Shinobi 3D*, appearing on the 3DS in 2011.



CREATING SPACE HARRIER

Yu Suzuki revisits his iconic blaster

What was the original idea for *Space Harrier*?
The original plan was supposed to be the military Harrier plane. However, there was not enough memory space for the graphics, so we changed the format to science fiction. Thus, we just kept the name *Harrier*, and it became *Space Harrier*.

Was it a tough proposal?
There were no successful 3D shooting games before *Space Harrier*. Therefore, when we submitted this idea, the 3D shooting genre was still taboo because the enemies were too small to hit.

Were there many challenges?
There were loads of challenges, especially due to the fact that we were using line buffer at that time so we could not add many objects in line. Therefore, we needed to come up with the solution by scattering the objects throughout the game.

What's the inspiration for the Fantasy Zone?
I liked the artist Roger Dean and the movie called *The NeverEnding Story*, so I created the world as homage to them.

Why is there a boss rush at the end of the game?
The thing was that we did not have very long to create the game, so we planned to create six bosses within three months, meaning we tried to create one distinctive boss every two weeks.

Tell us about the hydraulic cabinet design.
The Mechatronics team was developing the cabinet separately. Then later on we modified it to suit *Space Harrier*. When it came to modifying it, we discussed the cabinet's speed, durability performance and throttle's specification, for example. Of course, we regulated the cabinet control system by ourselves.

How important was the 'Super Scaler' technology?
The Super Scaler technology was important to increase speed. However, if I think about how important it was for the game to succeed, I do not think it was that important.

Why do you think *Space Harrier* remains so popular?
There are not many games like *Space Harrier*. And even now if you play it, it has good controllability, and it's easy to take a steady aim and hit the enemy. I believe this pleasant feeling of hitting the enemy is the most attractive part of this game.



AN INTERVIEW WITH MAKOTO UCHIDA

Golden Axe's director discusses his fantasy fighter

How did Golden Axe get its name?
The name of the game changed three times. Originally, it was called 'Battle Axe'. The development team members liked it, but we gave it up for licence reasons. The next name was 'Broad Axe'. This was an English word that we thought would match the original Japanese title. There were no licence issues, and so the development moved on. But right before the end of the development, the president of Sega US saw Gilius's axe, which was a bit yellow-ish. He thought that colour was gold, and he said 'Golden Axe' is the title of the game. We didn't like the name because it had no relations with the Japanese, but we were threatened that he would not sell the game if the title name was not 'Golden Axe', and so we changed the title name. Death Adder's axe was coloured gold instead of the original silver, and we also changed the plot to match the name. I now think it was good that we had changed the name, and I appreciate his advice.

What are its influences?
My father loved action movies, and I used to watch them with him. During the development of *Golden Axe*, I rented a video of *Conan* and watched it until the tape was worn… Of course, I was also inspired by *The Lord Of The Rings*. I bought many illustration works based on Middle-earth, and used them as reference materials. If I could, I would vote Gandalf for president!

Why are there three playable characters but only support for two players?
We did consider that plan, but we gave up due to the hardware specs. The maximum number of characters, including the enemies that we could display and operate at once, was six. But by the time we created the next title, *Revenge Of Death Adder*, the hardware specs had allowed us to make the game playable for up to four players simultaneously.

Why do the characters use magic?
I happened to have knowledge of element-based magic, so I simply applied it. Although we did not select water, because water would be a healing magic, rather than an attacking magic.

Why does Golden Axe remain so popular?
Probably because it was one of the earliest action games that was based on the fantasy world of swords and magic. The visual effects of the magic [spells] were pretty neat for a title back then, and









AFTER BURNER

1987

Shortly after making *Space Harrier*, Yu Suzuki had the resources to create his original plan for a military-based arcade game. Riffing off *Top Gun* (the plane you control is a F-14A Tomcat), *After Burner* throws you into a frantic gauntlet of enemy planes and helicopters, which are all intent on sending you to your maker. Sickeningly fast and with the ability to pull off gut-churning 360 degree spins, *After Burner* is another 'Super Scaler' game, and another that received countless home ports. Few of them were able to capture the sheer adrenaline rush that Suzuki's game offered, though. Numerous sequels followed, including the incredible *After Burner Climax*.

HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMP

1987

This is an update of Sega's 1976 original, but it utilises a first-person viewpoint and a unique control system to better simulate the throwing of punches. It's a fun game, but it does lack the variety and charm factor that Nintendo's similar *Punch-Out!!* offers.





ALTERED BEAST

1988

Sega's brawler was never a great game, but it does feature some cool transformation sequences that allow your fallen warrior to transmogrify into various terrifying beasts. It received numerous home conversions, including a solid Mega Drive port.

POWER DRIFT

1988

Racing games were well-suited to Sega's 'Super Scaler' technology, and *Power Drift* remains one of the best examples. Arguably a game best experienced in the arcades, *Power Drift* features huge karts, elevated rollercoaster-styled tracks and 25 varied stages to master, along with an exotic roster of different drivers to choose from. There are even special courses that let you use the bike from *Super Hang-On*, as well as *After Burner*'s jet. Numerous home ports exist for the game, but like various other 'Super Scaler' games, few did *Power Drift* justice. Indeed, it wasn't until the release of the Sega Saturn that *Power Drift* received a decent home version.









DYNAMITE DUX

1988

■ Few arcade games can match the surreal nature of *Dynamite Dux*. Sega's scrolling fighter features boxing crocodiles, mortar-using foxes, disembodied dog heads and all manner of bizarre foes. There are a large number of different weapons to use, from rocks to homing missiles, while comical oversized punches can be pulled off by holding down the fire button. Colonel Sanders even oversees the bonus boxing stages.

SEGA IGNORED THE POPULAR URBAN CITYSCAPES THAT WERE SO POPULAR WITH SCROLLING FIGHTERS AT THE TIME, INSTEAD GIVING GOLDEN AXE A DISTINCTIVE FANTASY SETTING





GOLDEN AXE

1989

■ Sega ignored the popular urban cityscapes that were so popular with scrolling fighters at the time, instead giving *Golden Axe* a distinctive fantasy setting filled with powerful magic, reptilian beasts to ride and dangerous weapons to wield. The bold move instantly endeared it to arcade goers, and it soon received numerous home conversions, with Sega's own Mega Drive port being one of the early draws on the console. While an excellent arcade sequel, *Revenge Of Death Adder*, exists, the separate Mega Drive sequels are nowhere near as good. And the less said about 2008's *Beast Rider* the better.





RAD MOBILE

1991

■ *Rad Mobile* continues Yu Suzuki's love of Ferraris by placing you behind the wheel of a Ferrari 330 P4. It features neat mechanics like the need to activate headlights and windscreen wipers at certain points of the game (it otherwise becomes much tougher), and is notable for featuring an air freshener of Sonic the Hedgehog, which predates his own appearance in his Mega Drive debut.

SPIDER-MAN THE VIDEOGAME

1991



■ Scrolling fighters proved to be quite popular for licensing, but Sega went a step further with its adaptation of the Spider-Man brand. While it features plenty of satisfying fighting and caters for up to four players (Spidey is joined by Hawkeye, Black Cat and Sub-Mariner), Sega moves beyond the typical expectations of the genre. Certain points of the game zoom the action right out, presenting a miniature version of the super heroes and an emphasis on platforming. It's highly entertaining, particularly when playing as Spider-Man, as you can scale walls and even hang upside down. Sadly, *Spider-Man* was never ported to home systems, meaning many didn't get to experience it.

ARABIAN FIGHT

1992

■ Another four-player brawler from Sega, and another that utilises impressive scaling effects. Unlike *Spider-Man*, *Arabian Fight* features a lot of action that takes place in the foreground, immediately setting it apart from similar games. It's fun, but a little repetitive due to its limited combat moves.





ALIEN 3: THE GUN

1993

■ Sega's adaptation of David Fincher's polarising film shares very little in common with the movie it's supposedly based on. It is an entertaining lightgun blaster, though with all sorts of exotic aliens to take down and some gargantuan bosses.

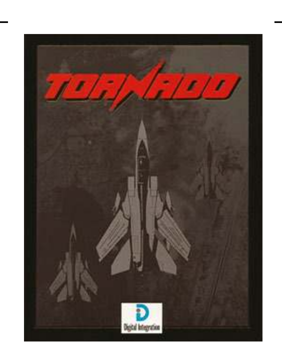
MORE SEGA ARCADE GAMES TO TRY

- MONACO GP, 1979
- N-SUB, 1980
- SUPER LOCOMOTIVE, 1982
- CHOPLIFTER, 1985
- ALEX KIDD: THE LOST STARS, 1986
- SDI, 1987
- WONDER BOY IN MONSTER LAND, 1987
- PASSING SHOT, 1988
- WRESTLE WAR, 1989
- SHADOW DANCER, 1989
- G-LOC: AIR BATTLE, 1990
- A.B. COP, 1990
- RAIL CHASE, 1991
- RIOT CITY, 1991
- OUTRUNNERS, 1992
- GOLDEN AXE: THE REVENGE OF DEATH ADDER, 1993
- BURNING RIVAL, 1993
- SEGASONIC THE HEDGEHOG, 1993

BEHIND THE SCENES

TORNADO

Since the late Seventies, the Panavia Tornado has been patrolling the skies over Europe and beyond. games™ talks to the key staff behind Digital Integration's innovative and beautiful flight simulator based on the iconic aircraft



Released: 1993
Format: PC, Commodore Amiga
Publisher: Digital Integration
Key Staff: Kevin Bezant (lead programmer), Robin Heydon (front end and mission builder programmer), David Marshall (project manager), Rod Swift (technical director, multi-player and testing), Matt Smith (art), Nick Mascall (3D modelling)

IN 1982, THREE YEARS AFTER THE PANAVIA TORNADO JET ENTERED OPERATIONAL SERVICE, DIGITAL INTEGRATION WAS FORMED BY DAVID MARSHALL AND ROD SWIFT. With both men working at the RAF as engineers, it was inevitable that the new company would specialise in simulations, especially flight simulations. After Marshall produced *Fighter Pilot* for the ZX Spectrum and Swift did the same for *Night Gunner*, this inevitability came to pass, and the side-business took off for the two men.

As the Eighties progressed, more flight simulations came and went, and DI's reputation grew. *Tomahawk*, *F/16 Combat Pilot* and *ATF* all appeared for the 8-bit computers, before the dawn of the 16-bit age brought whole new potential to the flight simulation genre. Digital Integration and co-owner Rod Swift was involved in the project chiefly on the management and multi-player side, but recalls the genesis of *Tornado*. "We did a conversion and enhancement of our successful Spectrum game, *ATF*," he explains. "Kevin Bezant [DI coder] developed the PC version, I did the Atari ST, and then the Amiga version was converted by new recruit Nick Mascall."

Already adept and experienced at working his way around the PC, Kevin Bezant began prototyping and specifying what the next generation of 3D graphics could achieve on the machine. But why *Tornado*? "Where we had previously concentrated on US aircraft, we decided that simulating the Tornado, with its unique low-flying using terrain-following radar, would be very different from other flight simulators, with a large range of attack roles and weapons," explains Swift. "Plus, there was a large amount of published information on it, which also always makes life easier."

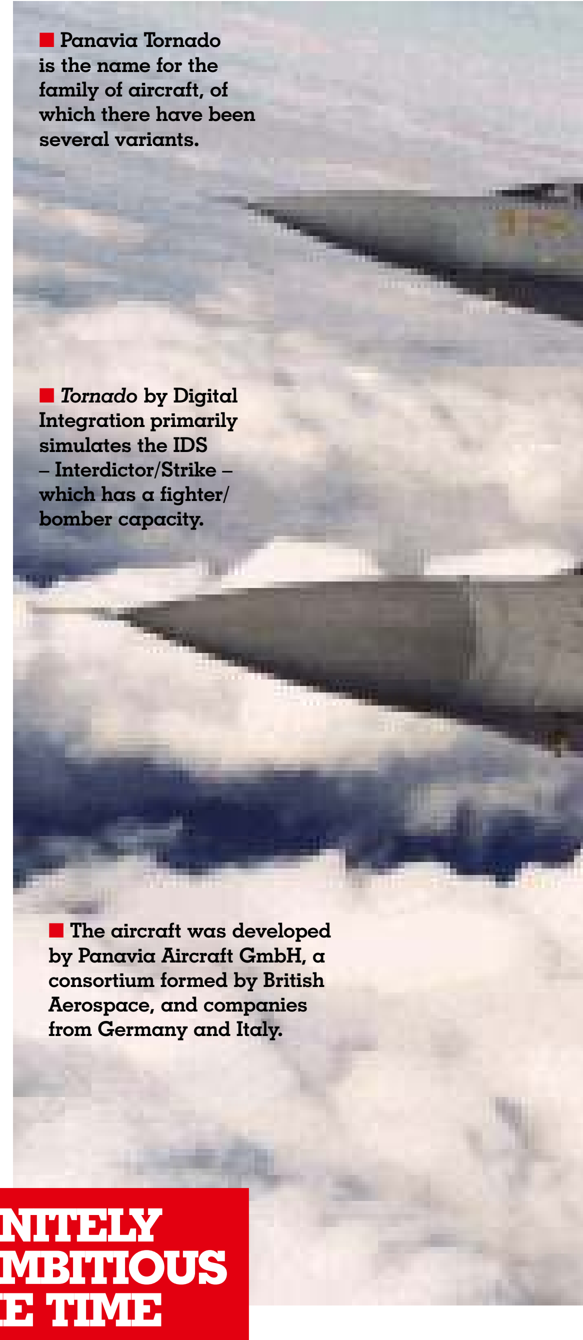
> **IT WAS DEFINITELY DI'S MOST AMBITIOUS GAME AT THE TIME**
> KEVIN BEZANT

This was a key element for Digital Integration. Even *Fighter Pilot*, released on the ZX Spectrum in 1983, and looking hugely primitive in comparison to simulations ten years later, was based on the control, aerodynamic limits and abilities of the F15 Eagle. To paraphrase Han Solo, it may not have looked like much, but it had it where it counts. Under the hood, all of Digital Integration's simulations worked hard to bring gamers an authentic experience, regardless of graphics. *Tornado* would continue this tradition, and more.

After working freelance on a number of games, Kevin Bezant joined DI in May of 1987. His first projects included 8-bit titles such as *Bobsleigh* and the aforementioned *Advanced Tactical Fighter (ATF)*, before he moved onto 16-bit and PC development and a key role on *Tornado*. "I was the lead programmer on the flight simulation side," he says, "Plus, I developed a new 3D engine, and wrote all the code for the flight model, avionics, cockpits, weapons, AI and so on."



David Marshall shakes hands with an air force representative at RAF Honington.



Panavia Tornado is the name for the family of aircraft, of which there have been several variants.

Tornado by Digital Integration primarily simulates the IDS – Interdictor/Strike – which has a fighter/ bomber capacity.

The aircraft was developed by Panavia Aircraft GmbH, a consortium formed by British Aerospace, and companies from Germany and Italy.

TORNADO FACT FILE

THE LOWDOWN ON THE VETERAN JET

■ The Tornado saw limited action during the Falklands War, but became famous for its deep strikes behind enemy lines during the First Gulf War in the early Nineties.

■ The aircraft's last military action was Operation Ellamy, where it struck vital blows against Libyan government forces.

■ Next year, the Tornado finally enters a well-deserved retirement as the Eurofighter Typhoon takes its place in the skies over much of Europe.

■ Armaments on the UK Tornado today include laser-guided bombs for fixed ground targets, the Storm Shadow cruise missile, and an internal 27mm cannon.



■ Flying over the countryside to the next target.

Other members of the team included Tony Hosier, who along with Mascall had the job of converting the game to the Commodore Amiga; Matt Smith (cockpit and front end art), and Robin Heydon. Says Heydon, "I did all the front-end coding, such as user interfaces, map interface, and mission planning. I worked very close with Matt to make sure we got the look of the front end just right."

Even at this early point, *Tornado* marked itself out from the crowd: multi-tasking window systems had very rarely been integrated into the genre at the time. David Marshall, the driving force behind the idea for the game, remained as a producer, as he and Swift also managed the day-to-day running of the software house. "The management side was a major part of our day in running a one/two million turnover company," recalls Swift. "For instance, Monday 10am was always our weekly management meeting, when we discussed all the various things that needed to be co-ordinated in the coming week, and more broadly, month."

Given the high level of authenticity and quality to Digital Integration's games, it was rare for more than one project at a time to be in development, and lead time between projects was often tricky. The company used its mettle to bring in third-party titles and smooth over these periods while considering its own future.

The pitch and general plan for *Tornado* foreshadowed its ambition. Not content with creating a new 3D engine with an unprecedented level of detail, the game was to include multiple missions,

THE TORNADO SUPERFAN

FRANKIE KAM FROM MALAYSIA TELLS GAMESTM ABOUT WHAT HE LOVES ABOUT TORNADO, AND THE COMMUNITY THAT KEEPS IT ALIVE TODAY

"My *Tornado* journey started in 2002 when a friend sent me a boxed copy, and a year later I was collecting everything *Tornado*, and even built a tribute website. I loved the game from the start, because it's a rich and fun flight simulator; its designers got the colour palettes just right, although it's best played at night with all the lights turned off! The sense of speed at low level, using flat-shaded polygon graphics, is pure exhilaration, and the 16-bit assembly language 3D engine, written by Kevin Bezant makes this possible. Not to mention the mission planner, which allows me to create complex eight-plane missions.

"The amount of gameplay packed into 20 megabytes of hard disk space is insane. Plus, its detailed 332-page paper manual is a classic for all would-be aviators and aviation workers. In short, *Tornado* is the perfect blend of playability and realism. It is a gem crafted out of the pressure of limited conventional memory of the day and the ingenuity of its Digital Integration development team. I would like to pay tribute to the late David Marshall for his incredible vision and legacy of DI flight simulations.

"Over the years, I have had the privilege of meeting, online, many of its fans. Speedwagon is a real-life pilot who inputs ideas on how to enhance the game. TomN is a virtuoso who can fly *Tornado* with one engine flamed out, in extreme weather conditions. The best part for me is *Tornado* being modded in 2018 - it has its own Discord server, created by TailFinn, where coding discussions and updates take place. The community is adding on to the great modding work, done by Heinz-Bernd Eggenstein in the mid-Nineties. It's one game that truly begs for a spiritual successor in modern-day graphics."

Check out Kam's exhaustive Tornado site: www.moodurian.com/tornado.



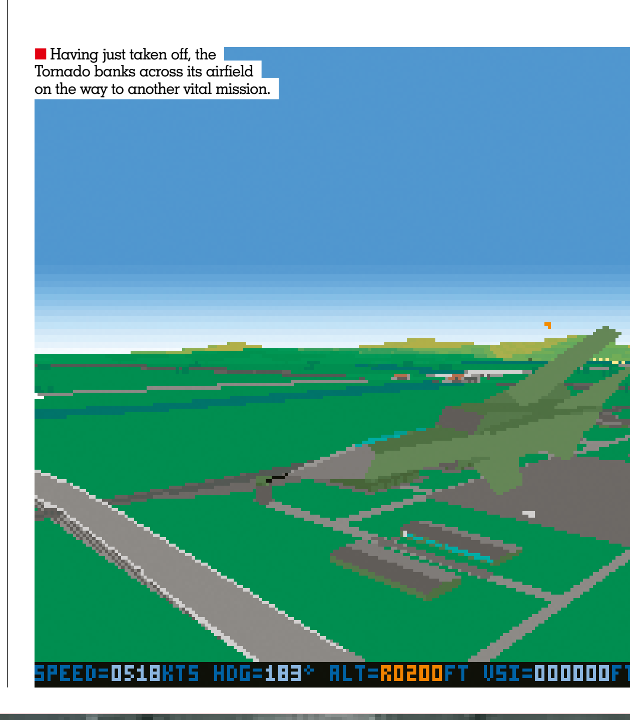
formation flying, synchronised attack options and an innovative multi-faceted mission planning system. "It was definitely DI's most ambitious game at the time," recalls Bezant. "Although we probably didn't realise it at the time!"

With its unique capabilities and iconic design, the game was built around the aircraft itself. Digital Integration already had a good relationship with the RAF thanks to Marshall and Swift's previous jobs, and this was tapped to good effect. Remembers Bezant, "We had a visit to RAF Honington, and they were remarkably generous with their time and information. We were allowed to take photos, which we used in the mission builder, and a flight lieutenant encouraged me to improve the ground radar in the game. He explained in some detail how they use the ground radar and calibrate it, so I felt obliged to do a better job!"

To the disappointment of the team, the RAF's actual Tornado simulator was unavailable due to servicing, and for some bizarre technical reason they were not allowed to pilot a real jet. Robin Heydon was also on the trip to Honington, and recalls it from the perspective of his role on the game. "They showed us how they plan missions using paper maps and computer terminals to input the waypoints," he says. "We also showed them the flight planning stuff that I'd been working on that allowed speeds and waypoints to be defined along with the curves, which they hand-drew depending on the speed of the turn, and calculating all the times involved. I remember they were rather impressed with what we doing!"

Tornado began development on PC in 1990, with Amiga and Atari ST ports planned. However, the latter conversion was quickly abandoned, although Bezant and Swift note different reasons for this. "The Atari ST simply wasn't powerful enough," says Bezant, while Swift cites the dwindling market for the computer as the main reason. An Atari TT version was briefly considered, and some early tools were developed, but again this was jettisoned for commercial reasons. Fluent in Z80

Having just taken off, the Tornado banks across its airfield on the way to another vital mission.



and 68000 assembler, Rod Swift took a back seat on the majority of programming. He recalls, "This was the last game we developed using assembler coding; we moved to C for all development after this."

This transition was helped by some of *Tornado*'s code, specifically its mission planner and menus, being written in the advanced language. A multiplayer mode, a natural addition considering the formation flying and attack modes, was handled mainly by Swift. "I developed the multiplayer menu pages, modem commands, speed negotiation handshaking and real-time message passing."

Beyond this, the DI co-owner also helped with the wealth of testing and fine-tuning that the complicated simulator inevitably required. Given the long development cycles that the company had found itself in, getting up to speed on C and C++ was also key, as Swift prototyped the systems to produce a generic flight engine that would reduce development times.

But in the meantime, *Tornado* was at full speed, and a new bespoke engine was being created by Kevin Bezant. "*Tornado* was developed from scratch," he says, "as the F16 Combat Fighter code base wasn't really suitable for the project." The new engine was split into two parts: the menu system and mission planner, written in C, 32-bit and 80x86, and the main game, written in 16-bit 80x86 assembler. With 3D hardware accelerator cards still some way off, everything was down to the computer's processor. "We were always up against memory limits on the PC," recalls Bezant painfully. "And always had to think up cunning ways to represent 3D objects and environments using a minimal amount of data."

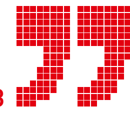
THE MISSION BUILDER TOOK SOME OBJECTIVES – LIKE THIS TARGET NEEDS TO BE DESTROYED – AND GAVE THE PLAYER THE ABILITY TO PLAN THE MISSIONS
ROBIN HEYDON

The environments that each mission took place in, together with airborne and ground-based graphics, took a heavy toll on the game's engine, and frequently required optimisation. Notes Heydon, "We were trying to do VGA colour graphics with a full set of 3D models, along with a full user interface and mission-planning software." The front end/main game usage of alternate development languages became a halfway measure that pointed the way to the future. For Heydon, designing the front end and menus, resources were as vital as in the main game; this meant not just the availability of memory and processing power, but also how much data could be transferred between the game's front and back end, and then back again.

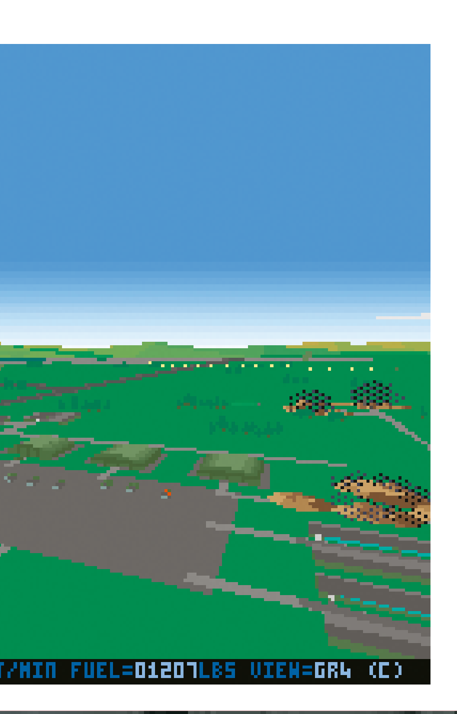
Yet despite his work on the impressive early screens, it was Heydon's creation of *Tornado*'s highly regarded mission builder that proved his most vital role. "The mission builder took some general objectives – like this target needs to be destroyed – and gave the player the ability to plan the missions," he explains. "I had to implement everything, from the windowing system, event system and all the maths for calculating the planned route of the aircraft." When the Tornado performs a co-ordinated turn, the radius of the turn changes, depending on speed. "I spent a couple of days just flying the actual aircraft in the back-end,

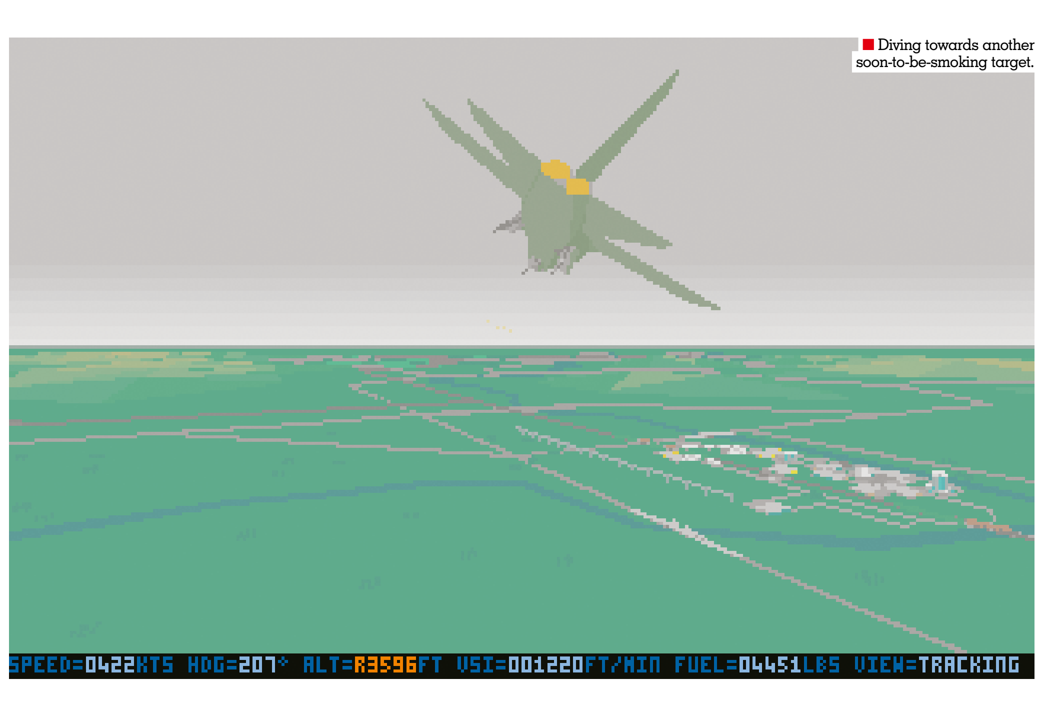
WHAT THEY SAID...

Tornado doesn't really cover any new ground [and] comes across as one-dimensional. [It] has some strong features: the manual, flight modelling, flight planning and graphics to game speed balance



Computer Gaming World, 1993





Diving towards another soon-to-be-smoking target.

■ Sitting on the tarmac, ready for take off.


■ This on-board status screen updates the player on damage, ammo and so on.


■ David Marshall, driving force behind *Tornado*, and co-owner of Digital Integration, sits behind his desk circa 1988.



■ Tactical information on each enemy is available from the menu screen, along with a digitised picture.

measuring the actual radius of the turn at many different speeds." This data then had to be fit into the mission-planning system, together with a wealth of other operational data. In turn, each contour and enemy within each mission had to be induced into the game's map – essential if the pilot was to negotiate their way successfully around the game world. "That was a fun exercise, especially the contours," continues Heydon. "The map used the same data as the back-end simulation, but then had to extrapolate details. For example, the anti-aircraft positions would need to have a display of their effective range." The 3D models and maps themselves were then created using Nick Mascall's 3D tools.

Despite its scope, *Tornado* was developed with a relatively small team. Bezant, having joined the software developer three years earlier, particularly enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the company. "It was a very quiet place to work, but as it grew it became more social," he remembers. "We were fortunate enough [on *Tornado*] not to have a deadline, however we did reach the point when it felt like it needed to be finished. I'm sure David and Rod were concerned about the time and cost, but we were never pressured because of that. Nevertheless, it was pretty much heads-down coding all the way. Having such a small team, we didn't have a need for lots of meetings. We also didn't have a computer network, so code and data was passed around using a 'frisbee link' – throwing 3.5-inch disks across the office!"

The team's efforts, combined to form a cohesive whole, created a masterpiece in flight simulation games, aided by its dynamic mission builder. Pre-mission setup meant the player got to decide what targets would be attacked first, how to use the weather to their advantage and a huge range of other options. Contained within each scaled 10,000 square miles of terrain were thousands of static objects, fields, hills, bridges, lakes, trees and enemy vehicles. "To me it was just about creating a dense enough environment," says Heydon, "And then allowing the player to understand the waterfall effect of having to take out one type of target before being able to take out the next." Single, pre-set missions, essentially the game's campaign, cushioned the player into the world of *Tornado*; an in-game simulator mode and training levels helped with familiarisation of the many keys involved. Multiple viewpoints and weapons, a comprehensive autopilot, flight plan and map displays and radar all had to be mastered if successful sorties were to be performed.

The release of *Tornado* overran as the team wedged the game into the Amiga, and fought off the perils of feature creep. "Flight simulators always take a long time to develop," remembers Swift. "Whereas a typical game of the era would be ten per cent code and 90 per cent graphics, simulators are the reverse with 90 per cent code and ten per cent graphics. Our programming teams tended to be bigger than normal, and our graphic artist team smaller. But due to the dedication of the whole team, more of the design goals were realised than in most of other games."

Considering this, it's perhaps no surprise the game's graphics were the major area where *Tornado* attracted criticism. Continues Swift, "At DI, we always

had a philosophy of good, rather than exceptional graphics, and to work hard on creating leading-edge, exceptional gameplay. I personally think this is still the best way to produce an exceptional game; with great, focused, uncluttered and direct gameplay."

While the shift from the front end's 16-colour 640x480 VGA graphics to a lower resolution for the main simulation likely caused some of this criticism, much of this was still unjustified, according to Heydon. "Considering what those machines could do, I think the graphics were outstanding. Remember, we had fully articulated 3D models with landing gear, moving wings and more." The Amiga port, released shortly after, was more of a struggle, but was still excellent thanks to the efforts of Tony Hosier. Reviewers' comments on the game's speed on the Commodore computer were met with grudging acceptance at DI. "It was difficult with so many compromises required," remembers Swift. "3D graphics and flight simulators are processor-intensive, which was why it was criticised on its frame rate. But we worked really hard on this in terms of what we could do and make it still playable. Life is always a compromise!"

Tornado's complex nature as a tactical multi-mission combat simulator was perhaps best encapsulated by its 300-plus page manual, heavy enough to stop even the most persistent door from closing. Written jointly by David Marshall and Nick Mascall, it also involved a graphic artist, a desktop publishing design team and many hours documenting all the features of the game. A map and keyboard overlay completed the package, and despite its status as a hard-core simulator, *Tornado* sold well on both PC and Amiga, and spawned a Desert Storm-based expansion shortly after. To promote the game, Swift himself constructed an easily transportable mock Tornado cockpit, which housed a PC, monitor, rubber pedals, joystick and throttle. The unit took him just one week to build out of wood, with its interior cockpit panels painted RAF grey, and camouflage colours on the outside. "The paint was only just about touch dry on the first day of its first exhibition!" laughs Swift.

AT DI, WE ALWAYS HAD A PHILOSOPHY OF GOOD, RATHER THAN EXCEPTIONAL GRAPHICS, AND TO WORK HARD ON CREATING LEADING EDGE, EXCEPTIONAL GAMEPLAY
ROD SWIFT

While there are some reservations from the team as to how things could have been done better ("It would have been better to have planned the project's scope and been more realistic about the team size", notes Bezant in particular), for Heydon, Swift and Bezant, they remain pleased with their efforts to this day. "For me, *Tornado* was a benchmark of quality," notes the latter. "Not just the game, but workmanship too. I'm still very proud to have been part of the team which created it." As an experienced developer of flight simulations, Digital Integration always had additional pressure to live up to with every release, thanks to its reputation of authentic and quality games. Says Swift, "I think there were five generational major milestones, starting with *Fighter Pilot* on the ZX Spectrum, then *F16 Combat Pilot* on the Atari ST. Then came *Tornado*, followed by *Apache Longbow* and, finally, *F/A-18E Super Hornet*."

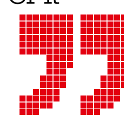
As befits its split-programming methods, *Tornado* sits at the centre of this development tree, locked in both the past and future. Additionally, competing with major companies like Spectrum Holobyte and Microprose was no mean feat. Concludes Swift, "Looking back I'm still proud of what the many people who worked at DI achieved and the recognition we got in competing with those teams globally. It was always a lot of fun, even though PC development then was a difficult time where the mass mainstream volume was on the consoles."

The 640k DOS memory limit proved a major problem. The solution, in the form of Windows 95, bespoke graphics cards and DirectX was on the horizon; whether you're a flight sim fan or not, it's hard not to appreciate the technological marvel that is *Tornado*. "To all the ex-Digital Integration staff," smiles Swift. "You know who you are, and you know what you did, and all credit to you."



Tornado makes for some frantic and absorbing gameplay. A lot of time and effort has been put into this game, and you'll have to put in a similar amount to get the most out of it

Amiga Format, 1994





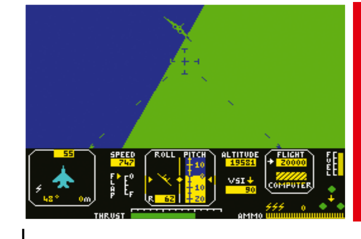
For a better view, the Tornado's canopy struts can be removed.



A Tornado's cruise missile flies unerringly towards it target.

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Fighter Pilot > Tornado > F18E Super Hornet



Fighter Pilot established Digital Integration's reputation for accurate, complex flight simulations



With the advent of Windows 95, graphics and speed improved incredibly, creating a new wave of beautiful simulations





INTERVIEW

TOMMY TALLARICO

From rocking out with his cousin Steven Tyler to strutting on stage at one of his Video Games Live concerts, Tommy Tallarico has successfully combined his passion for videogames and music throughout a successful career. **games™** caught up with the industry veteran as he enters the hardware world with a new Intellivision console



The violent *Robocop Vs Terminator* boasted muscular sound design.

WHAT WAS THE first videogame you played?
It would have been around 1975; my dad and I went over to a neighbour's house and they had a Colecovision Telstar, which was basically *Pong*. I remember me and my dad marvelling at the fact that you were able to move this knob and see something on the television moving at your control! You didn't even think it was possible. Even before TV remote controls there were videogames! So the next day my dad went out and bought one, and I still have it to this day.

Obviously music wasn't a great factor in these early machines – what was your first experience of music in videogames?
In the late Seventies I would take my dad's big, giant cassette recorder down the local pizza parlour where they had arcade games and record all my favourite sounds and music from them. I would then take them home, splice the cassette together and invite my friends over, play the cassette and games and get up in front of the TV with a guitar and play along.

So you were putting videogame concerts on even back then!
Yeah, that was my childhood, and of course growing up back then I never thought I would become a videogame composer, because there was no such thing.

ON ONE HAND I WAS APPRECIATING BEETHOVEN AND JOHN WILLIAMS, THEN I'D SIT DOWN IN THE SAME PIANO SESSION AND BE PLONKING OUT THE TUNE TO PACMAN!

How did your console and computer ownership progress from there?
I was an Intellivision kid… in our neighbourhood you were either Intellivision or Atari. As I was into sports, the Intellivision had better sports games. From there I had a Vic20 and a Commodore 64.

Did you pay particular attention to the music while playing these?
Oh yeah. I would learn the game's music on guitar and piano when it was something simple such as *Snafu* [Intellivision], 15 notes on a 20-second loop. On one hand I was appreciating Beethoven and John Williams, then I'd sit down in the same piano session and be plonking out the tune to *Pacman*!

At what point did you begin making a career out of your love of music and games?
When I turned 21. I literally left my parents crying on the doorstep as I moved out



The Terminator on Mega CD was a ground-breaking release in its day.



SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY

Aladdin
[1992]
Sound, Music and FX

Earthworm Jim
[1994]
Composer

MDK
[1997]
Composer



A massive hit on the 16-bits - *Aladdin*

from Massachusetts to California. I wanted to make it in the entertainment industry, so in the US you go to Hollywood! I got in my little two-seater sports car, drove to California with no money and friends, and no place to stay. The first day I saw a job selling keyboards at a guitar shop, and they said start tomorrow. I was homeless for those first three weeks, sleeping under a pier at Huntingdon Beach. I had brought just three T-shirts with me, and as I was crazy about videogames they all had games on, including this TurboGrafx-16 tee. I was wearing it that first day when a producer for Richard Branson walked in, saw the shirt and asked me if I liked games and if I wanted a job!

Incredible! Presumably this was for the new Virgin videogames label starting up in the US – what was your job?
Basically, it was six dollars an hour to tell them what was wrong with their games and give them ideas. I had been in California for three days and was still homeless, but in the videogames industry!

How did you start to work on sound at Virgin?
Every day I would bug the vice president of the company to ask him about music, and to give me the chance to do some. And after about three to four months, the opportunity arose. They were working on *Prince Of Persia*, so that was my first sound and music job. It won a bunch of awards for the sound, so they made me the music guy. That's how I got in. I converted the game's MIDI music files, and added my own stuff too. I was still a game tester as well!

By now it's the early Nineties and Virgin had begun to develop a lot on the 16-bit consoles.
Yep, and the first game we worked on for the Genesis was *Muhammad Ali's Boxing*, so that was my first game on the Genesis and its sound chip. Then we did *Global Gladiators*, working with David Perry and Doug TenNapel, before *Cool Spot*. That was a big-selling game, which won a bunch of awards, and then the same team did *Disney's Aladdin*. Around that time we were riding in limousines and having dinner with Richard Branson – we were the golden boys back then!

I WANTED TO TAKE EVERYTHING THAT I GREW UP ON AND PUT IT TOGETHER: VIDEOGAMES, MUSIC, SYMPHONIES, ROCK 'N' ROLL, TECHNOLOGY AND INTERACTIVITY

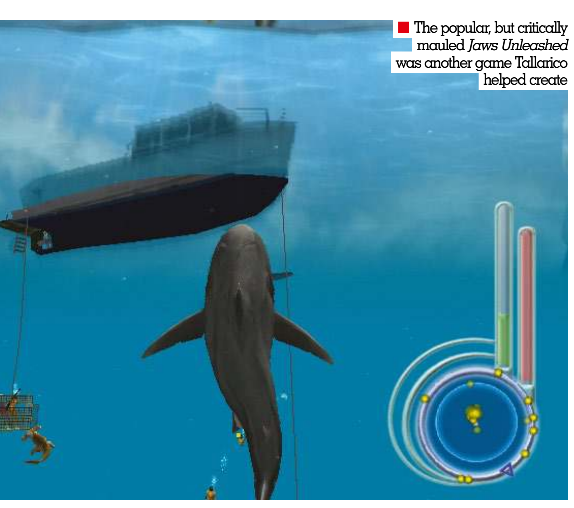
That must have been some experience…
He was always interested in music thanks to Virgin Records, so he came and sat in my studio sometimes. What we were doing in the early Nineties was revolutionary music for videogames and interactive audio, and he was always very interested in that. What a great guy; inspirational, amazing personality, down to earth and smart. For a young kid in their early twenties, to have somebody like that in your life was a huge thrill.

What other notable games were you involved with at Virgin?
After *Aladdin* we did *Robocop Vs Terminator* and *The Terminator* on the Genesis and Sega CD. That last one was the first time anyone had recorded live guitar and used 3D audio in a videogame. It was a turning point from cartridge to CD. But in terms of the graphics it still looked 16-bit, and the music was what you'd hear on the radio, so the quality





As an independent contractor, Tallarico Studios began work with David Perry and Shiny on games such as *Earthworm Jim*


The popular, but critically mauled *Jaws Unleashed* was another game Tallarico helped create


One of Tallarico's later projects, the soundtrack to space FPS *Advent Rising*

didn't quite match. I would get in screaming matches with the producers because they told me they didn't want the music in as it didn't 'sound' like a videogame. But I wanted [the music] to be so much more, so I followed my heart, and it had to go all the way up to the president of Virgin Games. He was Martin Alper, and he wasn't a gamer. There was me and [*The Terminator*'s coder] Silas Warner on one side, and everyone else on the other. So Martin listened to the music and said: "This is fantastic! What the hell do you wanna change this for?!"

After the success at Virgin, many of that team splintered off in the mid-Nineties, including yourself. How did you feel about that at the time?

We all went off to form our own companies. Dave went off and did Shiny; I did Tommy Tallarico Studios. What happened back then was that the videogame industry was very competitive and there weren't a lot of people doing what we were doing. If you were coming out with top-selling games, every company on the planet was calling to try and get you to leave. I was getting weekly calls from EA or Activision or Atari, and they would all ask how much I was making, and offered to pay double. But Virgin gave me my start. I respected that, so I didn't want to leave and go work for another company. So I started Tommy Tallarico Studios with some contracts already in place, many with Virgin. It was a nice change, being able to write my own ticket. I never had to worry about someone asking to change it.

What's your fondest memory of the Virgin period?

I'd say *Aladdin* for sure. We were familiar with the system and it was a major licence, with Disney giving us all access. Plus it was a great game, you were literally playing a Disney cartoon. I think it still stands up today, so that's a special one for sure.

At still a relatively young age, that must have been a big step, setting up your own studio – and did you employ anyone?

I moved my dad out so he could be my chief financial officer. I needed someone to deal with contract aspects, collecting money and paying bills, all the crap I didn't wanna do. It was just the two of us, plus a sound designer to do the technical stuff I couldn't do, which allowed me to focus on the music and creative process.

You continued to work closely with Shiny Entertainment?

David [Perry] and I are good friends; I was best man at his wedding. We did the Earthworm Jim games, and then *MDK* which was this moody, dark soundtrack. I'd go into Shiny once a week and spend a whole day implementing the music and working with the designers. Nick Bruty had a vision about the music as well, and he would give me different soundtracks that he liked that he had in mind for the game.

Having founded the Electric Playground videogame TV show, can you describe the moment when Videogames Live first became an idea?

I always wanted to see somebody do it because I always wanted to go to something like it. But then no one did. They had done a couple of symphony concerts in Japan, but it was very traditional, with everyone in tuxedos. I was inspired originally by one of my family members [Aerosmith's Steven Tyler] and going to his shows all my life. So I wanted to take everything that I grew up on and put it together: videogames, music, symphonies, rock 'n' roll, technology and interactivity, put it all together. So I formed the company in 2002 and it took me three years to put on that first show at the Hollywood Bowl, and everybody thought I was completely insane!

Of course that show was a big success, and it's been onwards and upwards since for VGL.

Yeah, and now we just had our best year, and we've got coming up five weeks in China and ten dates in Europe, including London and Paris. We've never done the same show twice, and every year we're adding new material.

You're also working on helping to bring a new Intellivision console out?

Yes, that's exciting. We're looking to bring back that simple family experience to gaming. We're going to up the graphics and sound and it's going to come with all the legacy games. Plus we're redoing completely some games with new graphics and extra levels. It will Wi-Fi connect to a store so you can download more games, but it'll be very inexpensive. And no crowdfunding.

When do you think we might see it?

It's not something you're going to see this Christmas, or the next. We have targets and goals, and the biggest mistake is to promise something and then not deliver. We're gonna take our time.

Final question: with such a long and successful career – what's been your favourite time so far?

For me, probably between 1992 and 1994. That was the golden age of the Genesis and Super Nintendo. When I did the music back then, such as the banjo tune for *Earthworm Jim* or the guitar for *The Terminator* CD, it was fun doing stuff that no one had done before. It was pioneering.

Metroid Prime was the debut title from Retro Studios, who would later go on to be one of Nintendo's most successful Western subsidiaries.

GAME CHANGERS

METROID PRIME

Developer: Retro Studios **Publisher:** Nintendo **Released:** 2002 **System:** GameCube

An unlikely success story for the GameCube, here we remember and reflect upon one of the greatest franchise transformations of all time

SUPER METROID WAS almost the end of it all. Nintendo would leave it a full seven years before enlisting Samas Aran for another adventure through the stars, the famed bounty hunter trapped in a limbo of sorts as Nintendo R&D1 started to explore 3D spaces and grappled with the implementation of more complicated camera and control systems. The N64 brought a lot of good, but a new Metroid game it did not. No, that honour would be reserved for the fledgling GameCube and entrusted to a brand-new Western development outfit by the name of Retro Studios. You see, *Super Metroid* set the benchmark for quality, ingenuity and innovation so high back in 1994 that Nintendo feared it would never reach such heights with a game baring the Metroid name again; *Super Metroid* was such a landmark moment for the series that Nintendo believed that it could only be something truly special that would breathe fresh life into the series and allow the series to hypnotise a new generation of players. That game would come in the form of 2002's *Metroid Prime*.

THE DECISION TO SWEEP METROID OUT OF THE REALMS OF 2D ACTION-ADVENTURE AND CAST IT FROM A FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE WAS, OF COURSE, A CONTROVERSIAL DECISION

The decision to sweep Metroid out of the realms of 2D action-adventure and cast it from a first-person perspective was, of course, a controversial decision met with some resistance at the time, both internally and externally. But it's one that would ultimately prove that there was more to first-person gaming than gunplay alone. As a first-person adventure *Metroid Prime* would become a tantalising

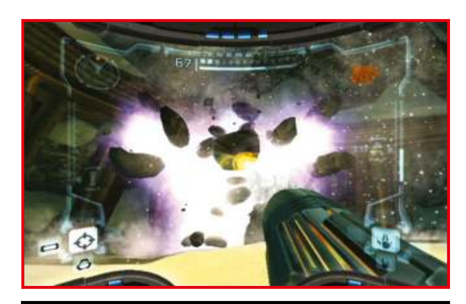
BEST BOSSES

I THE BIGGEST THREATS TO FACE DOWN SAMUS ARAN



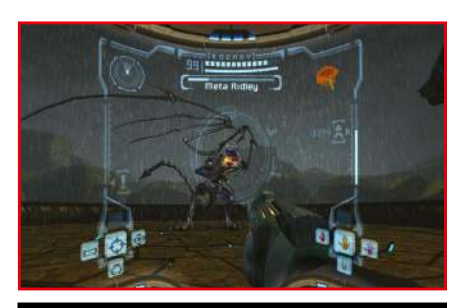
METROID PRIME

★ The final boss of the game, the battle against Metroid Prime puts everything that you have learned over the preceding hours to the test. It's classically designed, featuring distinct phases and challenging patterns of assault. A testing last stand on an excellent adventure.



THARDUS

★ Coming face-to-face with a giant rock creature can be pretty intimidating, especially as it looks as if it has no clear points of attack. That's why you have to utilise your Thermal Visor to look for weak points between the cracks of his outer armour; a fun boss that features cool system combinations.



META RIDLEY

★ Ridley is an absolute Metroid classic, and this climactic battle with the iconic enemy doesn't disappoint. It's hard as nails, cinematic and pretty breathtaking. So much of the game is building to this battle in the Artefact Temple, and it doesn't waste any time in ramping up the tension once you finally reach it.



action game that put as much emphasis on cautiously crawling through the caverns of Tallon IV as it did blasting creatures out of the sky. Studious investigation and cautious contemplation were the decisive elements that helped *Prime* stand starkly apart from the litany of first-person shooters arriving in the wake of such inspirational titans as *Half-life*, *System Shock 2* and *Halo: Combat Evolved*.

Metroid Prime spread its action out across a large, open-ended world space. The sense of scale it presented was remarkable, your sense of place within it all unprecedented. Progression through Tallon IV is – in classic Metroid fashion – gated by the necessity to hold certain weapons or powers in your arsenal, and so you go off in search of shortcuts and solutions. You battle against the toughest foes *Prime* has to offer with faith that a hard-earned victory might just let you acquire a new suit or beam charge to help you open up new corners of the space. You seek out every one of the world's mysteries in the blind hope that you might stumble upon the solution to a puzzle with the assistance of a new upgrade or power tool. This is the inscrutable pacing of *Metroid Prime*, and it works to effortlessly bind you and Samus together inside of the adventure.

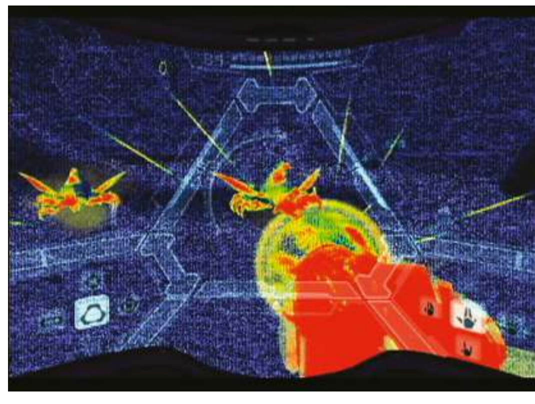
While there is indeed so much to praise the staff of Retro on here, it's perhaps the balance that still shines brightest. Never do you feel entirely lost or abandoned by the game, cast aside until you find the correct item. Never does it punish you for trying new tactics or fresh ideas in an effort to clear a source of conflict – if anything it encourages that sort of thinking and ambition all throughout. *Metroid Prime* offers a quite frankly ridiculous array of abilities that only help augment Samus and expand your opportunities for play, and the balance that exists within it to ensure you never get too far ahead or left too far behind is sublime.

But that's *Metroid Prime* all over. It's utterly sublime. It's a genre-skirting and convention-breaking first-person action game that caught everybody off guard, demonstrating that there was more to be found in first-person action games than running-and-gunning. It was never going to be easy to follow a game like *Super Metroid*, though Retro Studio did it with style, making many wonder why Samus didn't make the leap to 3D sooner. It's one of the best GameCube games, and we are still seeing and feeling its influence today.

KEY FACTS

- The boss battles were pretty punishing in *Metroid Prime*. That's largely down to the team at Retro deciding that it didn't want to put too much pressure on players while they were out in the world, instead challenge in combat would only materialise versus the giant boss characters.

- Despite arriving seven years after *Super Metroid*, *Prime* is actually a prequel. It takes place a number of years before the events on SR388 and is actually set shortly after the original *Metroid* and its GBA remake *Zero Mission*.





GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT GAMES THAT EXPAND YOUR SIGHT

SECOND SIGHT AND AUGMENTED VISION, THESE ARE JUST SOME OF OUR FAVOURITE IMPLEMENTATIONS OF 'DETECTIVE MODE'



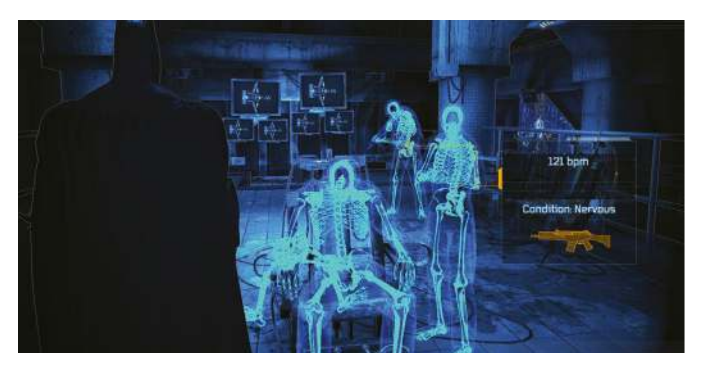
TLOZ: OCARINA OF TIME

The acquisition of the Lens of Truth is of vital importance in *Ocarina Of Time*. This ancient Sheikah artefact allows its wielder to see objects more clearly than regular vision will allow, helping Link to avoid deadly pitfalls and trap chests and assisting him in locating hidden doors masked by illusionary magic. While it isn't a necessary acquisition, it certainly takes some of the bite out of the Haunted Wasteland and Shadow Temple.



METAL GEAR SOLID

There's a possibility that *Metal Gear Solid* is the originator of 'detective mode' as we understand it today, thanks to the introduction of the thermal goggles. When activated this item imbues Snake with the power to see through walls, giving him the ability to see patrolling enemies as silhouettes. It's an item that removes an air of difficulty to the stealth action, handing you the ability to better figure out the optimum route forward.



BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

Batman is supposed to be the world's greatest detective. That's a prominent position that is rarely explored outside of Detective Comics, although *Batman: Arkham Asylum* gave it a pretty good shot. Through detective vision, the player is granted true omniscience – the ability to spot and track enemies through the environment, to quickly solve puzzles and understand the mysteries of the Arkham Asylum.



CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

Condemned is the overlooked classic of the Xbox 360 launch line-up. A brutal first-person brawler, it also happened to feature some pretty wonderful crime scene investigations. It's in these specific situations that you are granted the power of second sight – or 'instincts' – to help locate clues in the local vicinity, call upon forensic tools and ultimately solve puzzles that will let you press ahead into the next nightmare scenario.



METROID PRIME

The introduction of the Scan Visor in *Metroid Prime* was there for two reasons above all else. Firstly, it forced the player to slow down and take in the world around them; scanning points of interest and ancient enemies reveals new details of the world and story, helping to immerse the player in the situation. Secondly, it helped impart information on the game's most challenging enemies, a little help during an otherwise punishing adventure.



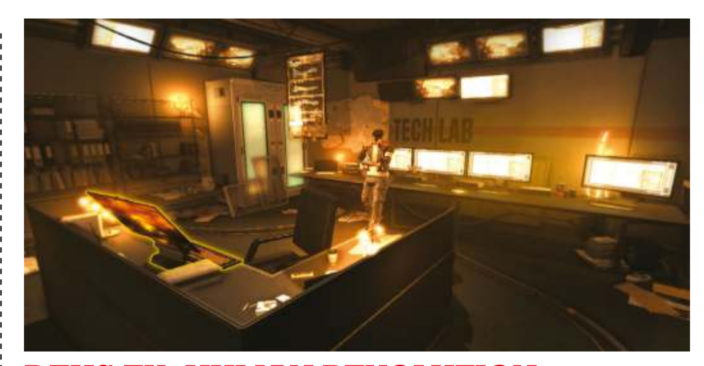
TOMB RAIDER

Crystal Dynamics never gave a whole lot of narrative justification for the inclusion of expanded sight in 2013's Tomb Raider reboot. Still, the introduction of 'Survival Instinct' allows Lara to analyse and survey her surroundings with ease, arriving at points of interest, collectibles, enemies and routes ahead. By the time *Tomb Raider* came about, augmented vision wasn't there to imbue the gameplay, but to give players a helping hand in navigation and combat.



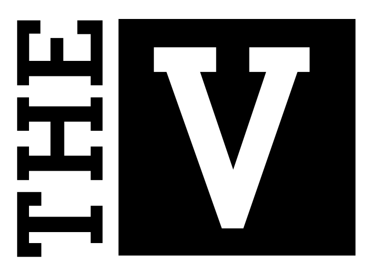
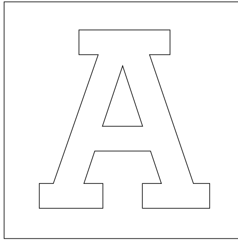
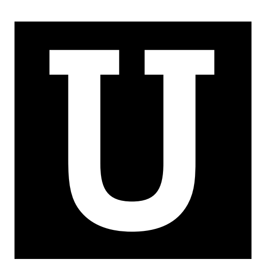
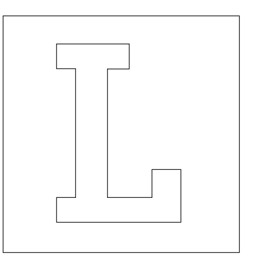
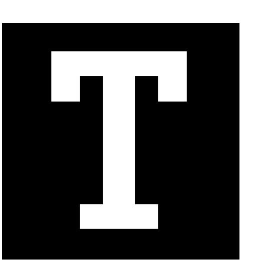
ASSASSIN'S CREED

While this would later be retconned by its direct sequel, we were always big fans of how Ubisoft justified the implementation of detective vision into *Assassin's Creed*. In such a large open world it needed to find a way of steering the player forward, and so 'Eagle Vision' was born. Considered a quirk of the Animus for Desmond's benefit, it was a visualisation of the highly trained sense of observation the assassin's once possessed.



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

If the point of detective mode is to allow you to see beyond a character's usual scope of vision in a pretty unreal way, then *Human Revolution* features one of the most grounded implementations so far. If you've got two Praxis points going spare you can augment Adam Jensen with 'Smart Vision'. Enemies gain a sickly yellow glow, computers and workstations become points of interest and you become an unbeatable killing machine.

THE 

DUKE CONTROLLER

MANUFACTURER: **HYPERKIN** PRICE: **£69.99**

To our minds, the Duke has been unfairly ridiculed over the years. Sure, it's pretty large as controllers go, reminiscent of the Dreamcast gamepad more than the svelte Dualshock design that PlayStation established in the Nineties. It was a 'beast', a 'monster' and so many other things. But was it a bad controller? We think not. In fact it was a gamepad with some serious design thought behind it and while it would be replaced and slimmed down in the years to follow, many still hold a place for the original Xbox's controller. So with that era of games resurrected by backwards compatibility on the Xbox One it's a nice move to see the Duke return.

While we could muse on how this all fits into Microsoft's fan-friendly strategy of fulfilling the whimsies of its most steadfast supporters, we should focus in on what Hyperkin has built here. The profile of the Duke is near identical to the original with only minor updates. A 35mm audio port sits on the bottom for headphone support; low-profile bumpers have been added for supporting modern games that weren't designed with the black and white buttons in mind and the memory cartridge slot has been filled in. The space has been occupied instead by the OLED screen that acts as your Home button, but also plays the original Xbox startup animation when switched on.

The overall feel is great. It's obviously large, so smaller hands may struggle, but if you have the grip, it's a very comfy controller. We loved the smooth action analogue sticks, but found the triggers to be a little soft. Some more resistance would be have been good here. The D-pad isn't the best (although possibly improved on the original) and the new bumpers are actually pretty rubbish, but they're largely a compromise between both contemporary design and not breaking the authenticity of the OG Duke too much.

On the whole, we really like the Duke and while it isn't wireless, it still makes for a great Xbox One controller for the right games. So long as it's original Xbox titles you're playing or games that don't need bumper access, this will do very nicely.

www.microsoft.com

VERDICT **7**/10

■ This large central button acts as your Home button on Xbox One and also lights up with the original Xbox's startup video. A fun addition if not entirely necessary.

■ While the button placement and shape takes a little time to get used to compared to the traditional Xbox One gamepad, the Duke's layout is actually pretty nicely designed.

GAMING CLOTHING



PLAYSTATION SHAPES MANGA POP T-SHIRT

Lots of things we love about this official PlayStation shirt. The colour scheme is fantastic for starters, the way it uses the iconic PlayStation branding in a new way is cool, and just the general energy and vibe of the thing speaks to us.
www.playstation-gear.com



KOJIPRO BLACK

This excellent tee is actually designed by the Kojima Productions team and even features the studio's logo just below the collar on the back with the motto, "From sapiens to ludens." It's a simple design, exclaiming Kojima's name on the front.
www.insertcointclothing.com



GENJI SPRAY T-SHIRT

This exclusive ThinkGeek tee has more of a sporty feel and honours Overwatch's Genji. The kanji read Bushin, from Genfi's own chest plate, in case you were wondering. His classic colour scheme just works really well on a tee like this.
www.thinkgeek.com

FAN COLLECTION: FOR THE FALLOUT FANATICS



FALLOUT NUKA-COLA CHECKERS

PRICE: **$20**

This simply branded board game brings together just the right amount of in-game character and practicality for us, making the simple game of checkers into something a little more engaging thanks to its use of Nuka-Cola and Nuka-Cola Quantum bottle caps for all of the pieces. There's a far more complex chess game also available with Fallout pieces, but we'll enjoy this one for now.
gear.bethesda.net



OPERATION: FALLOUT S.P.E.C.I.A.L. EDITION

PRICE: **$35**

Vault Boy just can't catch a break, can he? If he's not being farmed out to promo every innocuous or potentially lethal product out in the wasteland, then he's being operated on and having his Bottle Knee Cap or Dogmeat Breath removed by inexperienced surgical staff. Anyway, this is a nice twist on the classic family board game with some Fallout elements added in for flavour.
gear.bethesda.net



VAULT BOY BOBBLEHEADS

PRICE: **$15**

The famous collectibles from Bethesda's Fallout games have been transformed into real-world collectibles too, each representing one of the game's many perks. From the Charisma Vault Boy to the Repair Vault Boy, there's a selection to pick from on Bethesda's official store page. Each stands five inches tall and there are a number of different designs around to collect.
gear.bethesda.net



FALLOUT: WASTELAND WARFARE

PRICE: **$95**

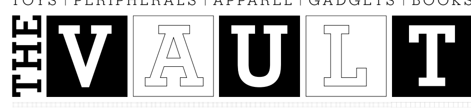
Scheduled for release in September and madly anticipated, you can get your preorders in now for this adventure board game adaptation of classic Fallout . Build up your squad and explore the wasteland, taking on missions and monsters, earning caps along the way and unlocking new paths and stories as you go. This starter set comes with a set of miniature figurines to get you going as well as cards, dice and scenarios to get the story going.
gear.bethesda.net



SMART GRIPS

PRICE: **$12**

For added security when holding on to your phone as well as double as an emergency stand, smart grips can be pretty handy to have around, particularly with some larger styles of phone. Bethesda has you covered with a range if smart grips with different designs on them, including the classic Nuka-Cola logo and the Brotherhood Of Steel insignia.
gear.bethesda.net



THE 100 GREATEST CONSOLE VIDEO GAMES: 1977-1987

PUBLISHER: **SCHIFFER PUBLISHING**



As recent compilers of a 'greatest games' list we sympathise perhaps more than ever with the challenge presented by putting together something that feels both comprehensive and revealing. Brett Weiss' focused effort on what we would consider the first full decade of home gaming releases helps to focus the approach considerably. But he goes much further than that and we really like what's been put together here.

Originally published in 2014, Weiss set himself the task of focusing on games that played well in the modern era as well as being classics of the day. He also vowed to write more than just a few lines on each… In both regards we would say he succeeded. Presented alphabetically, each game receives two to three pages of dissection, history and analysis, offering a brief but comprehensive overview of each title. Going from *Adventure to Yar's Revenge*, the list is broad, covering the gamut of genres and platforms of the era. Original box art, manuals and cartridge images are included where available along with any specific controllers that may have been used. You can also occasionally get some nice screenshots here and there.

On the whole the book is presented somewhere between an educational text and a coffee table book. The images are plentiful, but don't occupy entire pages and the text dominates, but isn't dry. It sits somewhere nicely in the middle and offers a lot of great insight into its 100 games.

For retro gaming enthusiasts such as ourselves there aren't necessarily any surprises or revelations to be found in these pages, as interesting as the final list happens to be, but if you missed out on this era of gaming and are venturing back through the history of the industry then this is a fine compendium to guide your journey.

www.schifferbooks.com



VERDICT 8/10



THE ART OF GOD OF WAR

The reinvention of God Of War on PS4 was a remarkable thing, and it's only made more wondrous by perusing the pages of this fantastic art book. It takes you through the many stages of Sony Santa Monica's work to bring Kratos to a new setting and a fresh, evocative, design aesthetic.

www.darkhorse.com



THE ART OF NI NO KUNI II: THE REVENANT KINGDOM

While Studio Ghibli didn't play any role in this sequel, its hand can still be seen in the look and feel of this excellent RPG. As such this art book is a fantastic compendium of concepts for characters and landscapes, full of wondrous personality and colour.

www.titanbooks.com

MINECRAFT: THE CRASH

The second official tie-in novel from Minecraft starts in a dark place with two friends getting into a car accident, but a VR version of Minecraft becomes part of the recovery and journey of self-discovery. An interesting take on the shared-world game experience for fans.

www.penguin.co.uk



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